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1: The Castle Town Shrouded in Storm Clouds

A burst of light blasted away the darkness and a few trees where I'd just been standing right along with it.

It's totally after me. Yep, knew it!

I'd been caught a little off guard by the abrupt attack at the small inn in the village where I was staying, but I'd managed to escape the initial onslaught and lure my attacker into a forest some ways away. I'd be able to break out the big guns here... Though I had my doubts as to how well they'd work on this particular pursuer.

See, it wasn't some roughneck or bandit I was up against, but a demon. These dudes fed off of darkness, and you needed one whopper of a spell to hurt 'em.

"Elemekia Lance!" I cried.

I fired the spell I'd been chanting at my approaching opponent, which looked like white mist in a vaguely human shape. But just before my shining javelin made contact, the misty figure melted into the ground! It was more like a white shadow racing along the grass now, so my spell naturally passed harmlessly over its head (or equivalent thereof). And as it did...

"Ra Tilt!"

New words of power burst from the darkness! For a moment, the white shadow was swallowed by a pillar of blue light. It let out a nasty death rattle, and when the blue light faded... nothing remained.

Whew! I let out a sigh of relief, then turned to the mysterious caster in the darkness.

"Thanks a bunch," I called.

“Hey, no problem,” a raven-haired girl replied as she emerged from the brush.

This was Amelia, one of my traveling companions. And she looked tense.

“There’s still one here,” she whispered, running her eyes over the area around us.

“Still?!” I exclaimed, scanning deeper into the darkness myself.

Perhaps due to her time as a shrine maiden, Amelia sometimes just *knew* things she had no earthly way of knowing. I couldn’t sense anything nearby myself, and the insects were singing like nothing was wrong... but if Amelia said something was there, then...

Right on cue, the insect noise stopped cold.

“Oh... I’d meant to conceal my presence. Well spotted,” said a familiar voice from behind us.

I quickly turned to catch sight of an old man melting out of the darkness. He was well kempt, with white hair that was neatly smoothed back and a warm smile on his face. His appearance was so unassuming that I wouldn’t have given him a second glance if we’d happened to pass him on a city road during the day... but Amelia and I had a history with this guy.



“Raltark...” I whispered, sweat rising on my forehead.

He may have looked like an ordinary old man, but he was a genuine demon... And from what I could tell, a pretty high-ranked one at that. I’d never fought him directly, but Amelia and I had caught a glimpse of his power in our last battle. That is, we’d seen him summon a horde of bottom-tier demons from the astral plane to possess the local wildlife. How much power did it take to do that? I shuddered to think...

Needless to say, no part of me wanted to tangle with this guy. But given the situation, I doubted he was just here to talk.

“I get it... That white thing was bait to lure me out here, huh?” I asked.

“Certainly not.” The old man shook his head with a slightly pained smile. “I was hoping he’d defeat you, and if he didn’t, we could strike at you together here... but he failed to notice the girl, and so that was that,” he said, momentarily turning his gaze on Amelia.

“But still... a surprise attack at the inn? I thought you were one for subtlety.”

“I haven’t harmed anyone uninvolved. There are circumstances, you see.” The troubled smile on Raltark’s face widened. “Nevertheless, I must be rid of y—”

Before he could get the words out, a chill ran through me. I could feel my hair standing on end.

What in the world?! A wave of some kind of alien hostility flooded the area. It was like pure darkness was pouring into me... But it wasn’t coming from Raltark.

“Huh?” Amelia perked up as well, craning her neck to scan the darkness around us.

Raltark did the same. “What?!” he cried out in shock, then withdrew into the night.

The wave of hostility likewise departed immediately, as if giving chase. That left only Amelia and me standing there, soaked in a fine sheen of sweat as we watched the demon

flee.

“What... What was that?” Amelia whispered in a hoarse voice after some time had passed.

“I don’t know...” I said listlessly, shaking my head.

The truth was that I had a pretty good idea. The source of the hostility was most likely Xellos. He was the only being I could imagine capable of emitting malice potent enough to scare Raltark off.

Xellos was a tagalong to our group. He generally acted like your typical mysterious man of the cloth (you know the type—every family has at least one). In sooth, however, he was a demon—not to mention a priest in the service of Greater Beast Zellas Metallium, one of Ruby-Eye’s right hands. As I’m sure you can imagine, that was a little secret Xellos and I were keeping between us for now... Them beans weren’t exactly beans I could spill to the rest of the group.

Unlike Raltark and his collaborators, Xellos was here to protect me. I wasn’t dumb enough to think he was doing it out of the kindness of his heart or anything. He clearly had some sort of agenda. But as much as I rued the idea of being someone else’s pawn... I didn’t have much choice about playing along for the time being.

“Well... I guess it’s over for now,” Amelia whispered.

I nodded in response. “Shall we head back to the inn?” I asked and turned, my cape swishing.

It was then that I heard Gourry and Zelgadis’s voices calling from afar, drawing nearer.

A little late, fellas!

“So, what exactly is the deal?”

It was Zelgadis who asked me that question the following morning as we set out on the main road the next day. As per his usual, he had most of his face covered with white cloth. Only his eyes peeked out from underneath.

“With what?” I asked, still walking.

“Xellos,” he prompted.

That brought me to a halt, but I managed to keep my voice calm and casual as I replied, “Same old same old, right? He’s always popping in and out unannounced...”

And as it just so happened, Xellos was currently “out.” He was with us for dinner the previous night, but when morning came... he was nowhere to be found. We even searched the inn high and low for him. I’d suspected that he’d gone off after Raltark... But since everyone present knew Raltark was a demon, I couldn’t just come out and say that. Instead, I’d suggested, “He probably left on some whim, and I’m sure he’ll return the same way.”

Amelia had bought it, and Gourry was the same blank slate as always. That left only Zelgadis to doubt me.

He looked at me dubiously for a few moments before pressing me, “Okay. What are you hiding?”

“What could I possibly be hiding?” I replied innocently.

Zelgadis stared at me a little while longer, then finally relented. “I don’t like this,” he grumbled to himself, though I could still hear him.

Hmm... he’s starting to catch on.

No matter how hard I tried to hide the fact that Xellos was a demon, the truth would come to light eventually. What would Zel do then? I doubted he’d turn on me in a rage, but there was a chance he’d leave the party on principle.

I mean, it wasn’t exactly like he was traveling with me because we were friends. The guy had been transformed into a chimeric fusion of golem and brow daemon against his will a while back, so his main purpose in life was searching for a way to regain his humanity. Such things were beyond the purview of regular sorcery, which forced him instead to seek out whatever answers he could find in obscure lore and legend. And since legendary trouble always seemed to find us whenever we hung out together, he was sticking with me out of pure convenience.

So, yeah, the whole state of affairs was annoyingly

precarious. I only had one recourse—getting to the bottom of things. Why were Raltark and his goons after me? Why was Xellos trying to protect me? I still didn't know, and even if I did, fighting guys on Xellos and Raltark's level was way beyond my power.

I was hoping what lay ahead in the capital of the Kingdom of Dils, land of legends, would afford me a little leverage to regain control of the situation. Gyria City, here we come...

The city was lively as we walked through it that afternoon. There were people coming and going, rows of stalls lining the streets... All your typical big city sights. In that regard, the only unusual thing about the view was the higher-than-usual ratio of soldiers to civilians out and about.

Folks, I present to you Gyria City, the capital of Dils!

How come demons couldn't get enough of me lately? What kind of infighting did they have going on? We were here in the home of demon legends to solve those mysteries! At least, that was what I'd told my team...

We'd arrived just a little before noon, secured an inn, and gotten a meal, after which we'd decided to start gathering info in earnest.

"But how exactly are we supposed to find all that out?" Amelia asked me as we walked down a large avenue flanked by stalls. "I doubt anyone in town is just gonna have the lowdown on the latest demonic schemes..."

"Hmm... Good point." I thought for a minute. "Let's see... For now, let's keep an ear out for any rumors at all about demons. Talk to the guards who watch the Kataart Mountains and see if there's been any movement on that front. Also, word is there used to be a manuscript in the area, so we'll see if we can track down any remnants of that, and ask the sorcerers' council for anything they might know. It's not like I expect to uncover their whole plot immediately, but we might find some clue about what they're up to or how we can fight them... I know it's a slim hope, but it's our best

shot. You're sick of just waiting for them to show up at our doorstep too, right?"

Those were my honest thoughts and feelings, but I could only share them now that Xellos wasn't present... even though he'd agreed we should come here to Gyria City.

See, in addition to protecting me, he'd been tasked with bringing me to the location of a certain item: the Claire Bible, a book said to enumerate magical techniques from other worlds (though it was frequently regarded as nothing more than myth by society at large). Not that he'd told me what he was expecting me to do with it, mind you.

Now, as for what that had to do with our layover in Gyria... Xellos and I both knew we couldn't just "accidentally" stumble upon the Claire Bible without the others getting suspicious. As subterfuge, then, I'd proposed to him the idea of first stopping in the city and having everyone do a little sniffing around. And when the time was right, Xellos would come up with "a hot lead" he just happened to hear, and then guide us all to the place in question.

Of course, this little proposition of mine was all just pretext. My real objective here, as I'd told Amelia, was to seek out something I could use against the demons. I wasn't expecting it to just fall into my lap... but truth be told, I'd found the seeds of a certain legendary forbidden spell here once before. That is to say... passed-down knowledge about the Lord of Nightmares. Judging from Xellos's behavior when I mentioned that name, I was hoping it might just be the key to what I was looking for.

See, back in the day, I'd tagged along here with my big sister. She apparently knew some big shot in the city, so we were shown around the palace for a bit and heard all kinds of things in the process...

"That's it! Amelia, do you know anyone in the palace here? Could you get us an 'in' with them?" I proposed. Amelia was in line for the throne of the Holy City of Saillune, after all. She might have some connections to the royal

family here.

She thought about it for a minute and replied, "I think some people here would know Dad, but I doubt they'd recognize me. We don't have all that many dealings with this kingdom."

"Hmm, I see," I whispered, arms folded. If Amelia didn't have any influence in the local court, a royal audience was out of the question. "In that case... so be it. Amelia, you go ask around at the temple. Say you're abroad to study different lands' legends about demons."

"Roger."

"Zel, do you think you could ask around town?"

"Sure. I don't exactly have anything better to do," he responded with a small nod.

"I'd like to go hit up the sorcerers' council myself. The trouble is..."

There, I stopped and looked over at Gourry, who was just walking along in silence. Meet my traveling companion who'd lately been doubling as my swordsmanship instructor. He was an incredible fighter, not to mention tall, blond, and handsome to boot... Yup, his face was first-rate. It was the brain behind it that was the problem! If you want a quick reference point for how bad it was, let's just say that in an IQ contest, he *might* eke out a tie with a skeleton!

Now, all my (hilarious) grumbling aside, the bottom line is that I knew I couldn't trust Gourry to do any recon on his own, so...

I thought for a while and then suggested, "Let's see... Gourry, you team up with Zel to talk to the townspeople. Zel probably won't take off his mask in the city, which might put the people on guard."

"That is true," Zel said, agreeing. "And it's not like Gourry could handle a proper investigation on his own..."

"That's also true."

Jeez, Gourry, at least put up a fight...

"Well... so, anyway, the plan here is to combine Gourry's

serviceable looks and Zel's functioning brain. Here's my thought—Zel will do all the talking, while Gourry just flaps his lips silently! That should cover it!"

"You mean like... a ventriloquist dummy?" Gourry said doubtfully.

"I feel like... that would be terrifying to watch..." Amelia likewise objected.

"Fine, go about it however you like. Just get the job done. We'll meet back up at the inn around dinner."

"But are you sure about this, Lina?" It was Gourry offering up doubts for once.

"Sure about what?"

"Well, with the way things have been lately... the demons'll probably come after you again. Are you sure you should be going off on your own?"

No sooner had those words left his mouth than...

"Wooooooooow!" Zel, Amelia, and I all cried out in shock.

"Master Gourry! You actually offered an insightful input for once! I've never seen that before!" Amelia exclaimed.

"It's been ages since you last said something smart! Did something kick your brain into gear?!" I echoed.

"Indeed, that was a surprise. I hope it keeps up," Zel said quietly.

Gourry just scratched at his head in response to our glowing praise, muttering, "Um... guys..."

Yeah, okay, so maybe it wasn't *that* impressive, but still...

"A-Anyway, I'm sure it'll be fine," I said carelessly. "It's true they've attacked us in the daylight a few times... but they at least seem reluctant to drag innocent people into things. They could've just blown up the whole inn last night, but they went out of their way to pinpoint me... I figure they won't try anything so long as I'm in a crowd."

"I hope you're right," Gourry whispered, clearly still worried.

"Don't sweat it! If I worried that much about every little thing, I wouldn't even be able to go to the little girl's room

on my own.”

Theoretically, Gourry *could* have accompanied me to the sorcerers’ council, but that’s precisely what I was trying to avoid. I’d visited a local council with him once before, and as we sat in their chilly, dank library... What else? The big lug went right to sleep.

Annoyed, I’d slapped him upside the head with the book I was reading—which turned out to have a metal-reinforced cover. It turned into a whole thing. I mean, you smack a guy with one measly little 500-page book, and he just starts going on about, “Hey, you got me with the corner!” It naturally blew up into an argument, and in the end, the local council provost tossed both of us out on our butts. Not my finest hour!

“Seriously... I’ll be fine. We’ll meet at the inn at sundown!” I called to the group, then turned on my heels and set out on my own.

I glanced back to see everyone splitting up and going their separate ways, apparently having accepted my proposal, when...

Whump!

“Huh?!”

“Wagh!”

The minute I rounded the corner, I ran into a young boy. He looked about eleven or twelve years old, and had silky black hair with a slight wave to it. I mistook him for a girl at first, actually...



“Sorry...” he mumbled, then turned to run away.
“Hold it,” I said, snatching him by the back of his collar.
“Wh-What?!” he yelped, looking up at me fearfully.
“Hand over that purse you just snatched from me, or else.
You want a visit with the guards?” I taunted with a grin.

The boy quickly changed his tune, offering up the coin-laden pouch from his pocket as he shouted, “F-Fine, take it!
Just don’t turn me in! You can even beat the crap out of me!
Just don’t hand me over to that band of weirdos!”

“Band of weirdos?” That phrase put a furrow in my brow.
Even people who hated the town guard generally didn’t call
them “weirdos.”

“Yeah! The town guard has been really weird lately!” the
boy insisted.

“Hmm...” I thought for a while. “Okay. I won’t hand you
over. In exchange... tell me everything you know about the
guard.”

“They’re all just really weird. And the king first among
them...”

We were now camped out in the corner of a small eatery
nearby. The boy sipped away at his orange juice and cut
straight to the chase without even introducing himself.

“What kind of ‘weird’ are we talking about here?”
“Well... lately, he’s been gathering up freelance sorcerers.
And tons of soldiers to boot.”

“What?! Seriously?” I gasped, trying to keep my voice
down. “Like he’s preparing for a war?”

“How would I know? He started recruiting fighter-types a
few years ago... and now he’s bringing in more sorcerers.
Rumor has it that he’s teaching black magic to ordinary
soldiers.”

“Black magic?!” I parroted, the furrow in my brow
deepening.

I could understand teaching soldiers attack spells, but
black freakin’ magic?! If I were gonna teach a spellcasting

newbie some practical arcane offense, I'd pick an easy fire spell... Flare Arrow, for instance.

Yeah, yeah. Call it boring or cliché or whatever you want, but the classics only become clichés because they're so tried and true! Flare Arrow wouldn't work on incorporeal beings like ghosts or demons, but it was sure effective against humans. Since it set whatever it hit aflame, you could get some bonus practical effects against buildings too.

Moreover, it was one of the easiest attack spells to learn.

Never in a million years would I have thought to teach someone black magic. Yeah, sure, it was more powerful than shamanistic attack spells like Flare Arrow. It could even damage ghosts and demons... But it was tricky to learn, and it didn't come with any nifty secondary effects like incidental conflagration. Even the easiest black magic spells out there still required a degree of focus and mental control. You also needed to perform certain gestures while chanting them. Overall, they were just kind of a pain in the butt.

In short, it was hard enough to teach black magic to people who already knew their way around spellcasting. It really wasn't the kind of thing you'd throw at a total greenhorn. I thought everyone knew that, but...

“Is all this really true?” I asked the boy.

“I don’t know. It isn’t like I saw it with my own eyes,” he replied, taking another sip of his orange juice.

“Fair enough...”

“But that’s what the rumors say. The king’s been acting weird ever since this guy called General Rashart arrived. They say he’s even been sending messengers to the dragons and the elves.”

“Huh? To the dragons and elves?”

“Well, to the big elf village west of here. And Dragons’ Peak to the north, between here and the Kataart Mountains.”

Curiouser and curioser. Even if the king was planning to go to war with another country, dragons and elves would never get involved in human affairs...

Wait...

“You don’t think—” I cried out, standing up as I made the connection.

“Don’t think what?” the boy asked, looking up at me.

“Ah, it’s nothing. Nothing at all...” I replied, shaking my head. “Now, you said this was all rumor, but where’d you hear it?”

“I dunno. Just around,” he said indifferently, gulping down the last of his juice.

Figures...

Still, I couldn’t just write this off. I was trying my best to remain calm, but I could feel cold sweat running down my back. If my hunch was right...

Could Dils be planning an attack on the residents of the Kataart Mountains—on the demons?!

“An attack on the Kataart Mountains?!” shouted Amelia, lover of justice and peace, as she sprang to her feet.

Her theatrics set the room abuzz. The other patrons all turned their eyes to our table.

“H-Hey, Amelia! Keep it down! Everyone’s staring!”

“This is hardly the time for discretion, Lina! The city is mired in evil’s grasp!”

“Yeah, it *might* be! But that theory’s just hearsay and a little guesswork on my part for now! Keep your fires of justice at a smolder until we have some proof!”

“Well... I suppose...” Amelia sat down, but still looked unsatisfied.

It was now later that night. We’d met back up at the inn as planned, and we were currently discussing our findings for the day over dinner. When I shared my take on what I’d heard from the little pickpocket, Amelia was unsurprisingly inflamed.

“The part about the king rustling up soldiers and sorcerers is true, at least,” Zelgadis added in. “Word on the streets is that he’s recruiting them in large numbers. I didn’t

hear anything about black magic, elves, or dragons, though. You said you heard that part from a young boy... Are you sure he's trustworthy?"

"I mean, kids do have wild imaginations, but it's hard to imagine one creating a story like that out of whole cloth..."

"And children will sometimes admit to things adults won't!" Amelia insisted. "We should track down this boy and ask him for more information! Where did you find him, Lina? What was his name?"

"Well, like I said, I kinda just ran into him... Come to think of it, I never did get his name..."

Obviously, I'd omitted the fact that he was a thief. Amelia, our resident proponent of all things justice, wouldn't have taken it well... We'd risk her trying to track him down in a righteous rage or something.

"In other words, no way to corroborate it," Zelgadis said, his voice comparatively cool.

"We'll just have to confirm it ourselves!" Amelia declared, clenching her fork with shredded shrimp and fried egg skewered upon it. "At the very least, we cannot simply sit back and watch! Attacking the demons... It's a noble cause, and certainly a brave one, but it's too reckless! All the more so if they're being manipulated into it by some weird general!"

"I agree," I replied with a nod.

"Is it really that reckless if they're getting help from elves and dragons?" Gourry asked unconcernedly.

"Totally, even then," I responded.

"How come?" he asked in curiosity so idle that it almost physically hurt me.

"Well... it's true that elves and dragons are stronger than humans, but demonic power is on another level entirely. Legend says that during the Incarnation War, when Ruby-Eye incarnated in the Kataart Mountains a thousand years ago, one single demon destroyed hundreds of dragons all by its lonesome. That might be an exaggeration, but the

sentiment behind it—that is, ‘the demons mopped the floor with the dragons’—is most likely true. What I’m saying is that, even with elves and dragons on the city’s side, this offensive would just be the equivalent of kicking a hornets’ nest.”

“And I’m not sure elves and dragons would even *want* to join in on a human brawl with demons,” Zelgadis put in.

“Yeah. One way or another, it’s a reckless plan.”

“Hmm...” Gourry thought for a minute. “If it’s really that dangerous, why is the king doing it?”

“That’s exactly what we’re trying to figure out!”

“Maybe he means to avenge his father,” Zelgadis muttered.

Aha... That *would* explain it.

About twenty years ago, the previous king of the realm, Dils II—known as the Resolute King or Dils Rwon Gyria—mustered up an army to strike at the demons in the Kataart Mountains. He rode with an elite force of five thousand men specializing in magical tactics, and they bravely—rather, foolishly—crossed Dragons’ Peak en route to the mountains in the north...

They were never heard from again, leaving their legacy to rumor. There was no telling which stories were true and which weren’t, but the trip to the Kataart Mountains itself was a documented fact. Perhaps the currently reigning Dils III—Dils Quolt Gyria—knew the demons had done something to his father. Perhaps he’d been nursing a hatred for them all these years because of it. Perhaps that hatred had come to a head.

Or... perhaps someone had put him up to it.

“We *have* to investigate!” Amelia declared with passion in her voice once more. “I’ll bet you it’s that General Rashart! He’s infiltrated the kingdom and is exploiting the royal family’s personal weaknesses in the name of some foul plot! I won’t stand for it!”

“Well, we don’t know that for certain—”

“But we can’t just look the other way! Now that we know it’s a possibility, we *must* seek out the truth!” she insisted, interrupting me.

Ah, of course... I finally realized what had her so riled up. Her home, Saillune, had also been disrupted by a demon infiltrating the palace.

Here too, a mysterious figure had appeared out of nowhere, effecting great, uncertain changes within the kingdom... Amelia was probably comparing what was happening in Dils with the nightmare she’d faced herself not long ago.

“You *will* all help me, won’t you?!” she implored us, looking first to me

“Er...”

I found myself hesitating. This situation could spiral out of control all too quickly. I wasn’t exactly anxious to go inserting myself into the middle of it... but I also knew Amelia would never accept an answer like, “This seems like a pain in the ass. Let’s stay out of it.” And so...

“S-Sure,” I agreed, backed into a corner.

Amelia gave a satisfied nod, then turned to Zel.

“I’ll go along. I have no reason not to,” he said bluntly.

“Master Zelgadis is in, then! And Master Gourry probably isn’t thinking very deeply about any of this, so he’ll agree out of hand.”

“Sure will!”

Don’t prove her right, Gourry!

“So it’s settled, right?” she asked with a pleased smile.

“Shouldn’t we at least confirm the rumors first?” I questioned.

“Don’t be naive, Lina!” she countered. “There *is* a plot afoot! My justice sense tells me so! That means we have no time to waste confirming things! We must root out this intrigue at once!”

“How, pray tell?” I interjected numbly. “If we want to go straight to the source, we should head for the palace. The

best thing to do would be to meet this general and feel him out ourselves... but you don't have the clout to get us an audience, and sneaking in is probably out of the question. None of the palace folks I talked to would confirm or deny anything, either..."

"Uh... hmm." Amelia folded her arms pensively.

"How about we get arrested on purpose?" Gourry offered up—the stupidest idea yet. "We'll start some kind of ruckus in town and let ourselves get arrested. Then we'll get to meet the general in charge of the guard, right?"

Hahh... I found myself sighing. "Okay, let's say we get arrested and get to meet the general... You really think he'll answer our questions then? He'll see us as common criminals!"

"Well... still..." Gourry mumbled.

Still what?

"That might be just the thing!" Amelia exclaimed.

C'mon, girl... Not you too!

"We'll get arrested to infiltrate the palace, then break out of our cells and find indisputable proof of the plot!"

"Except if we don't find anything, we'll look even guiltier!" I argued.

"Huh?!" My words briefly silenced her, but it wasn't long before she was clenching both hands in front of her chest once more. "Justice always prevails! That means we *will* find proof!"

Oh, for the love of...

"Again, this is *all based on rumor*, you guys," I reiterated with another big sigh. "It very well may be that this stuff about some mystery general running amok in the palace is totally made up."

"But Master Zelgadis said that he really is recruiting soldiers and sorcerers..."

"Which could just be a new general's way of changing up the ranks. And even if it's true he's been reaching out to the dragons and elves, maybe he's trying to *prevent* an attack

by the demons of Kataart rather than trying to *launch* an attack *on* them. And if that's the case, it's the kingdom's business. Not our place to interfere.

"I agree that if a new general is spurring the king into a reckless war, someone should do something about it... But you don't just step in without good reason to think that the rumors are true. Once you have that, *then* you go searching for proof. In other words, our first job is to do a little preliminary investigating.

"If they're sending messengers to the dragons and elves, they need someone who speaks those languages. And if they're teaching soldiers black magic, they need sorcerers. In either case, the sorcerers' council here should know more. If we're going to investigate, we should go to them and any local info brokers."

"Then you and I will hit up the sorcerers' council, while Master Gourry and Master Zelgadis will ask around the city, right?!" Amelia demanded.

I sighed to myself once more.

Another fine mess they've gotten me into...

Two days later, I hit unexpected pay dirt.

"Are you Lina Inverse?" came a voice out of the blue.

I looked up to see two fully armored soldiers standing behind me. All eyes in the sorcerers' council library turned swiftly on the three of us.

"Nope," I said plainly. Nothing good could come of this. My best option was to throw them off and slip outta here ASAP.

"I believe that you are," the soldier protested, unfooled and unfazed by my insisting he had the wrong gal.

Ugh. What a bunch of sourpusses...

For the past two days, Amelia and I had been doing research here at the sorcerers' council. Amelia was charged with asking around, while I was scouring their records. That of course meant I wasn't investigating current events, but

rather poring over tomes of old knowledge for scraps of demon-fighting wisdom...

The hitch was that the sorcerers' council had a visitor's log. Someone must have seen my name written therein. No point in denying it, I guess.

"Okay, so I am," I broke down and admitted, slamming my book shut.

"Come to the castle with us, won't you?"

Yup, thought so... These guys were geared like royal knights. I'd sort of expected something like this to happen... meaning the real question was what they wanted with me.

"What's this all about?" I asked.

"We were asked to bring you in and told that you would be here. Nothing more," he answered rather plainly.

Interesting... These guys' straightforward demeanor actually made it harder for me to protest. If he'd said something like, "You don't need to know," I could have weaseled my way out of it with a line like, "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me why." But now I couldn't raise a fuss about how this was fishy without the people around us thinking *I* was fishy.

In other words, they had me. I figured I might as well go along without making a scene.

"...Okay. I'll come with you, but I need to let my companion know I'm going. She'll get worried if I just disappear."

"All right, fine. Make it snappy," the guard replied grumpily.

I returned my book to its rightful place on the shelf, exited the library, and went looking for Amelia. The soldiers followed close behind, but I couldn't exactly complain about that.

I wandered all around, until eventually...

"Lina?!" In fact, she was the one who found *me*. She took one look at me, then at the soldiers behind me, and shouted, "What did you do this time?!"

“Hey! Don’t make me out to be the guilty party here! They wanna take me to the castle for some reason, so I figured I’d play along.”

“Play along, huh?” Amelia scowled. “Are you sure about this? You don’t want me to come with you?”

“Nah, I’ll be fine,” I replied with a light wave of my hand. “If they try anything funny, I’ll just bust up the castle and escape.”

“Hey!” one of the soldiers objected, understandably angry.

“Chill, man. That’s only *if* you try any funny business. I would never unleash holy terror against folks on the up-and-up.”

“Hmph,” the soldier grunted, but was otherwise silent. Obviously, he couldn’t tell me not to go on a rampage even if things did get shifty.

“Anyway, Amelia, just let the others know what’s up. Now, boys, let’s be off!” I said breezily enough, turning my back on a worried-looking Amelia.

As I walked through the front gate, I was greeted by an expansive green lawn. At the end of a white flagstone path stood a large, staid, yet sturdy-looking palace made of dark stone. The lawn, encircled by castle walls, was dotted with standalone buildings and annexes. To my left, rows of knights were doing drills led by what I could only guess was the captain of the guard.

“This way,” the soldiers insisted, leading me away from the drilling knights to a rather large standalone building. There were a few scattered soldiers posted around it.

I’d been part of a setup like this before. The whole thing stank of an enemy ambush.

“We brought Lina Inverse!” one of my escorting soldiers proclaimed once we reached the building’s entrance.

“Let her in,” a voice replied.

“Sir!” the soldier responded, then pulled open the door.

Inside was a generously sized room, outfitted to host meetings. Three men sat at the large table at its center. One of them was dressed like a sorcerer. He was a rather funny-looking man in early old age. The other two looked like military men: one rough and middle-aged, the other young and handsome.

“So you’re Lina Inverse, are you?” the coarser-looking military man asked with a beaming smile as he rose from his seat. “I’ve heard all about you. It’s an honor to meet you. I do hope you’ll forgive us for calling you here so abruptly.”



His manner was as friendly as could be. Not... exactly what I was expecting.

“Serving as general to the Kingdom of Dils, I’m Rashart.”

“What?!” I shouted before I could think.

Rashart blinked in surprise, asking, “Is there something odd about my name?”

“Er... No, of course not. I just used to know someone with the same name, is all...” I covered hastily.

For real, though! If you wanna pull the rug out from under a girl, just let her know the absolute gentleman in front of her is the guy she suspected of being an evil mastermind! Life can sure throw some mean curveballs...

“Now then, Mistress Lina, allow me to tell you why I summoned you here. I have a favor to ask. Won’t you have a seat?” General Rashart invited.

I did as he suggested, taking the chair across the table from the three men. The soldier closed the door behind me.

“As I’m sure you already know... to the north of the Kingdom of Dils lie the Kataart Mountains, home to demons,” the general began once I was seated. “You could say we’re under constant threat of attack. We’ve been spared a major invasion so far, but that doesn’t mean such a thing will never happen. Yet in spite of this eventuality, the kingdom’s preparations for it have been painfully underwhelming.”

One of the soldiers brought drinks, but I passed. Just in case they were, y’know, drugged or something.

“All they’ve done is build a small fortress near the mountains and station men there as lookouts. While they may be able to stop the occasional local loose cannon from storming into Kataart, they can do nothing to stop demons from coming the other way. The best they could do would be to send a soldier to the city with a warning. They don’t stand a chance of holding off demons themselves.

“This got me thinking... what if we could teach the men magic for exactly that purpose?” There, the general paused for a moment and cast a glance at the old sorcerer. “Of

course, we went to the local sorcerers' council for aid. The vice chairman here has taught us a great deal, in fact. But there are certain things about attack spells one cannot grasp except from a mentor with ample field experience.

"And it just so happened that someone caught sight of your name in the visitor's log at the council library. Your reputation precedes you. Surely you have some experience fighting demons. That's why I've called you here. So... what do you say? Would you teach our soldiers some practical attack spells?"

"Gee... well..." I folded my arms in thought. This wasn't at all what I'd been expecting. My gut feeling had been that, once we were alone, General Rashart would reveal himself to be a demon, show his true form, and detail his deepest, darkest plans in cackling excess... after which Gourry and the others would come running to my aid, having somehow figured out what was going on. "Kinda going off-script here," I muttered.

"Script?" the general asked, somehow managing to overhear.

"Huh? Er, just kidding. There's no script... Now, I don't have any particularly urgent travel plans at the moment, but I can't exactly say I'm not busy. I'd rather not get tied down here. I'm not traveling alone either, so..." I quickly tried to cover.

"Oh, I would never dream of keeping you for long," the general assured me, waving both hands. "A month... No, a week. If that's too much, just two or three days would suffice. Of course, I don't expect you to teach the men all the ins and outs of casting in such a short time. Just give them pointers on what to watch out for, what demons are really like, how they tend to fight... that sort of thing."

"Well, still..."

I took a minute to think about this. Let's say Rashart actually turned out to be a demon or something nasty like that. If he wanted to lure me into the castle and get my

guard down, stringing him along to expose him later might not be the worst idea in the world. And let's say he turned out to just be some harmless old general. If all he really wanted was what he was asking for... Well, it was a noble enough position, but I had no intention of sticking around and being a teacher forever. That said... two or three days might not be so bad.

At any rate, I couldn't do this without first letting the others know. Amelia in particular would be convinced the evil general kidnapped me if I didn't come back. Heck, she might even storm the castle herself.

"My companions are in town, so I should probably get back and discuss this with them," I explained.

"I can't allow that."

"Oh?" The general's stark protest made me raise an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"We're keeping this information from the general public for now," he replied calmly. "Our plan is meant purely as a measure against demons, but there are those who would interpret our actions as preparation for war against another kingdom. To avoid any unnecessary misunderstanding and panic, I'd like to keep this private until everything is in place. Thus, I must ask you to refrain from sharing what you've learned. Of course, I wouldn't mind you discussing this with your companions if they can promise to keep it a secret... But not in the city."

Hmm... Okay, fair enough.

"So, given the circumstances, would you mind if I summoned your companions here? I'll send messengers to retrieve them, so I invite you to wait here in the meantime."

"Well, in that case... don't mind if I do," I said, nodding in agreement.

"Here you are."

I'd been shown to a room within one of the standalone buildings. It wasn't particularly luxurious, but it was

perfectly adequate for guest quarters. It was reasonably sized, and furnished with a bed, a black oak table in the center with a pitcher of water on it, and two chairs.

“We’ll call you when your companions arrive. Until then,” the soldier who guided me said, closing the door behind him as he left.

I listened as his footsteps drew farther and farther away... until silence fell over the room.

“Whew,” I sighed, flopping down on top of the bed. Pretty comfy, if I do say so myself.

But what the heck is going on here? I turned the question over in my head as I lay on the bed, watching the ceiling...

Before long, footsteps approached. It seemed way too soon for the gang to be here... I sat up and looked toward the door. In a matter of moments, the footsteps halted in front of it. Then there was a soft, metallic clank from the other side.

Crap! They locked me in?! I sprang to my feet, but just then...

“Heh heh heh... this will be the end of you, Lina Inverse,” came a voice from all around me. One I’d never heard before.

And then... *Fwoooooom!* An explosion shook the room! Dust billowed around me as the stone wall collapsed inward! Everything went dark.

Eventually, the shaking quieted down. I couldn’t sense anyone nearby anymore.

“Blergh! Ack!” While choking on the lingering dust cloud, I got to my feet in the center of the now-trashed room.

Just as the blast had rocked the place, I’d dived underneath the oak table with a freshly cast wind barrier. I’d chanted it while whoever was outside stopped to lock the door and declare their victory.

The durability of the table and my wind barrier—as well as perhaps a slight targeting miscalculation on the enemy’s

part—had been my salvation. I was completely unscathed, but...

So this really was a trap, huh?

I hadn't heard one word of an incantation from outside the door. The blast came immediately after their petty proclamation of triumph. The only beings in this world that could cast spells without a chant were demons.

Was General Rashart one after all? Either way, my top priority right now was getting the heck outta here! Fortunately, the blast had blown open the outer wall, so I had an easy exit.

Now, to regroup with the gang...

I stepped through the hole in the wall and out onto the lawn. I could see soldiers coming my way from a distance. I knew I couldn't let them catch me, but I also couldn't just knock around a bunch of innocent mooks who probably weren't in on the plot. In other words, time to make tracks! I began to chant a fast-flight spell...

"You're still alive?!" hissed a voice from on high.

I quickly looked up to see a figure floating in the air above me. Obviously, it wasn't human... Its form was humanlike in size and shape, but its body was as black as charcoal, twisted and warped, with a single spot of white for a face. On it were two wide-open eyes and two blood red streaks down each cheek. Yup, totally a demon!

Is this General Rashart's true form?! I wondered, but the voice wasn't right. This floating figure sounded exactly like the voice I'd heard in my room.

To be fair, powerful demons could change their appearances to look exactly like humans... Changing their voices probably wasn't too much of a stretch.

At any rate, this development forced me to shift gears. I'd have to bust my way out now!

"Then this time... I won't show any mercy!" the demon hissed, and a moment later, countless pale white orbs appeared around it. "Die!"

With that command, the balls of light began raining down around me!

“Waaagh!” I quickly took off in a run.

Vwoosh! One orb exploded behind me. All right, I’d managed to dodge the opening attack! I kept running at full tilt, heading for the castle’s front gate.

“You won’t escape!” the demon cried, releasing more balls of light.

They tore through the ground, blew out part of the castle wall, and sent innocent soldiers flying! The demon’s orbs were tearing out in all directions, wreaking indiscriminate destruction.

Holy crap! Show a little restraint, dude!

I moved in a zig-zag pattern, dodging the demon’s attacks by a narrow margin, then made a break for the hole the guy had just conveniently made in the wall! Keeping pace, I glanced back over my shoulder to see him doggedly pursuing me.

“I told you, you won’t escape!” the demon railed, conjuring even more balls of light than before.

No... No way!

“Don’t do it!” I shouted as I came to a stop.

But... whether my voice reached him or not, the result was the same. The aimless orbs of light streaked out and turned Gyria City into an inferno.

2: To Dragons' Peak in Search of Legend

The city was now horrifically ablaze. Flames crackled, people fled in panic, screams rang out, and destruction spread.

"What have they done?" I whispered, staring blankly at the scene.

Though hidden by all the fire and smoke, the demon still had to be nearby. I couldn't believe he'd launched into such an indiscriminate attack just to kill *me*... It was unconscionable.

I heard another roar—another attack, perhaps. I guess he was planning to raze the city to keep me from escaping. Or maybe this was just the only way his power worked. Either way, I couldn't let it continue.

There was only one way to keep the devastation to a minimum, though: I had to lead the jerk out of town myself! So, yeah... not a plan I was rushing into with unbridled glee, but letting an entire city go up in flames on my behalf wasn't gonna help me sleep at night.

I quickly began to chant a high-speed flight spell—a risky maneuver. I wouldn't be able to cast any serious attack spells while I was using it, meaning I'd be down anything that could harm a demon. Worse yet, the wind barrier it produced wouldn't keep me safe from any demonic attacks that happened to come my way mid-flight. But what was a girl to do? I couldn't exactly break out the big guns in the middle of the city anyway, so escape-by-sky it was. No way in hell was I making it out of there on foot, after all.

"Lei Wing!"

Wreathed by a barrier of wind, I took off into the air. I soon caught sight of the demon darting through the black smoke that covered the town. It stopped and hovered before me. Hang on... this was a different demon than before! It had skin the color of a drowning victim, with a single large eye in the middle of its face.

There's more than one of them? Are they trying to surround me?!

Before I could even react, it fired a black shockwave in my direction! I quickly manipulated my spell to dodge it and take me further out of the city.

Yet before I could get far, another demon appeared to block my path! *Ugh! Gimme a dang break already!* The new arrival threw a glowing javelin of energy directly at me on sight. As I tried to take evasive maneuvers...

Whoom!

“Geh!” I coughed as a wave of heat and force rushed over me.

Damn! Did that come from the one behind me?!

I was mostly unharmed courtesy of my wind barrier, but momentarily distracted nonetheless. When next I looked up, the energy javelin was just inches away! Crap! I wouldn't be able to evade it in time! It passed easily through my wind barrier and—

Vwip! With a tiny sound, it literally vanished before my eyes.

What just happened?! I wondered numbly for a second. I looked up and saw the demon who'd thrown the javelin was now focused on something behind me. The next moment, a figure appeared beside the demon, and the demon's body shattered. That left only the new figure hovering there...

Priest Xellos, servant of Greater Beast.

I turned back to see that the demon chasing me was gone as well. Xellos must have destroyed that one too. He'd shown up out of nowhere, neutralized the energy javelin, then effortlessly slain both demons pincering me.

Xellos was every bit as... No, he was far more powerful than I'd thought.

He mouthed something while pointing to the ground below. My wind barrier made it impossible for me to hear him, but I assumed he was asking me to land. I nodded slightly and descended through the smoke to the avenue below, which was swirling with heat. Xellos touched down next to me a moment later. Everyone nearby must have fled the city already, as I could sense no one else around us.

"My, my... It seems I was a bit too late. How careless of me," he said unconcernedly, his smile unchanged in spite of the situation. "I'm starting to think the attack back in that roadside village was all a ploy to separate us... Really, I never thought Master Raltark would debase himself by playing the decoy. Hahaha."

"Don't 'hahaha' me! Anyway, we should get outta here. I'm not really itching to get fried to a crisp... By the way, did you beat Raltark?"

"Oh, as a matter of fact..." Xellos smiled abashedly as we walked side by side down the city street bathed in the orange glow of flames. "I fear he gave me the slip... Most troubling. Hahaha."

"Not funny!"

"Well, after all... he is a Priest himself. That puts us on equal level in terms of rank... But I must say, I had no idea how many of them were camped out in this city. There's so much going on in the world, isn't there?"

"Argh! Stop talking about this like it's some amusing trivia! Can't you at least use your power to put out the fires?! Those demons went nuts and started attacking the place wholesale!" I shouted.

At that, Xellos replied with a troubled smile, "I fear my knowledge of water and ice magic is..."

"Darn it! You're so useless at times like—" I stopped before I could finish. I'd spotted a boy fallen by the roadside up ahead. There was a red stain spreading on the ground

around him, like he'd been hit with a piece of burning rubble.

Eleven or twelve years old, most likely. Slightly wavy black hair. I recognized him. Yeah... It was the kid who'd tried to snatch my purse in town.

"Hey! Are you okay?" I ran over to him and reached out, but...

Oh no...

He was already cold. I rose to my feet, letting Xellos take my place kneeling next to him.

"His heart is not beating," he declared.

"I know that!" I shouted angrily in response to his apparent indifference.

I said a silent prayer for the departed boy, then finally started walking again. My teeth were clenched. I had to... I had to put a stop to this. But despite my best intentions, the demons were still too powerful for me. Which meant...

"Well, what are you going to do now?" Xellos asked, interrupting my thoughts. "I could hardly advise remaining in this city..."

I know that. Staying here any longer will only make things worse... which means my next move is obvious.

"I need to... regroup with the others," I said, my voice hushed. "We'll leave town immediately. And if I can't find them..." I fell quiet for a moment, then said plainly, "I'll go find the Claire Bible myself."

Vwoosh! A beam of light was suddenly streaking toward me, piercing through the wind and fire.

"Ngh?!"

I quickly dodged the ray, and just as quickly saw a demon charging in its wake. However...

Bwush! Almost the instant it arrived, Xellos launched an attack. I'd have a hard time describing exactly what had happened, but the end result was, let's say, one highly pulverized demon head.

How many had he killed now? It had to be over ten, but I'd long stopped counting.

Xellos and I were currently wandering the city in search of Gourry and the others. We'd yet to find them, and demons just kept crawling out of the woodwork in the meantime.

It was almost hard to believe that one city had this many hiding in it... The guys we were seeing were roughly on par with the demons I'd fought before—the likes of Seigram and Vizea—but Xellos was so powerful that he was squashing them like bugs. He'd instakilled every single one that had shown up so far. I was starting to feel like the damsel in an old heroic saga—just here for looks.

After a bit more walking, Xellos stopped abruptly and wrapped me in his cloak with a flourish. I scowled in confusion, when all of a sudden...

Bwoooooom! A series of explosions erupted around us! The extreme heat and pressure caused the buildings on either side of us to buckle, and the ground below to boil with a red glow. But thanks to Xellos's protection, I barely felt a thing.

When the light of the explosions at last died down, I could see a human figure slowly approaching from beyond the heat haze. His silver armor and naked blade both glinted vermillion in the firelight. He stopped a short distance ahead of us.

"You ruined everything..." said a familiar voice, steeped in anger.

The armor this man wore was clearly of the Kingdom of Dils. As I suspected... it was General Rashart. His eyes, smoldering with rage, were fixed not on me, but on Xellos. He must not have been pleased at the interference in his assassination plot.

"I believe this is our first meeting... General Rashart," Xellos hailed in a voice that could even be called friendly.

"Our first... and our last," Rashart replied, stepping forward. "For some reason, Sir Raltark told me to stay away from you, but..."

“Things have gone too far for peace to be an option, I’m sure,” Xellos said with his usual smile, as if to egg the guy on.

“Of course! We’ll see who survives—the Priest or the General!”

My first taste of Rashart’s radiating hostility had me scrambling backward posthaste. A collateral hit from the power these guys unleashed as they fought could prove deadly.

“Hrragh!” Rashart howled. The blade in his hand flashed purple and changed shape.

Had he channeled his power into a mundane sword, transforming it into a magical demon-slaying weapon?!

“Hah!” Rashart then cried out, firing a black ball of energy from his hand at Xellos. He then leaped right after it, charging Xellos himself!

And Xellos... didn’t dodge! Rashart’s orb smashed straight into him!

Fwoom!

I quickly ducked to dodge the ensuing explosion of black light and miasma. I’m sure Xellos didn’t bother to do the same because he knew he could tank it. Rashart must have realized as much himself—the blast was merely a distraction.

Before it completely died down, Rashart heaved his magical sword high and leaped forward shouting, “Die, Priest!”

Zing! A sharp sound rang out in time with his battle cry.

When the smoke cleared moments later, the sight that greeted me was... Xellos, run through by Rashart’s sword?! No, it was—

Whunk... Something flew toward me and impaled itself in the ground at my feet. It was part of Rashart’s blade. It crumbled in the wind as I watched, first returning to its original shape before disintegrating into a small pile of silver sand. Xellos must have done something to break the

enchanted sword just before it pierced his corporeal form.

“What?!” Rashart gawked, then pulled back what remained of his weapon, which had snapped without putting so much as a single scratch on his opponent.

“Shall I tell you?” Xellos asked with his usual smile. “Why Master Raltark bade you not come after me?”

Before those words finished leaving his mouth... *Vwomm!*

“Graaah!” Rashart let out an echoing scream. Something like a drill—as black as night and as tall as a person—had appeared from thin air and impaled his midsection!

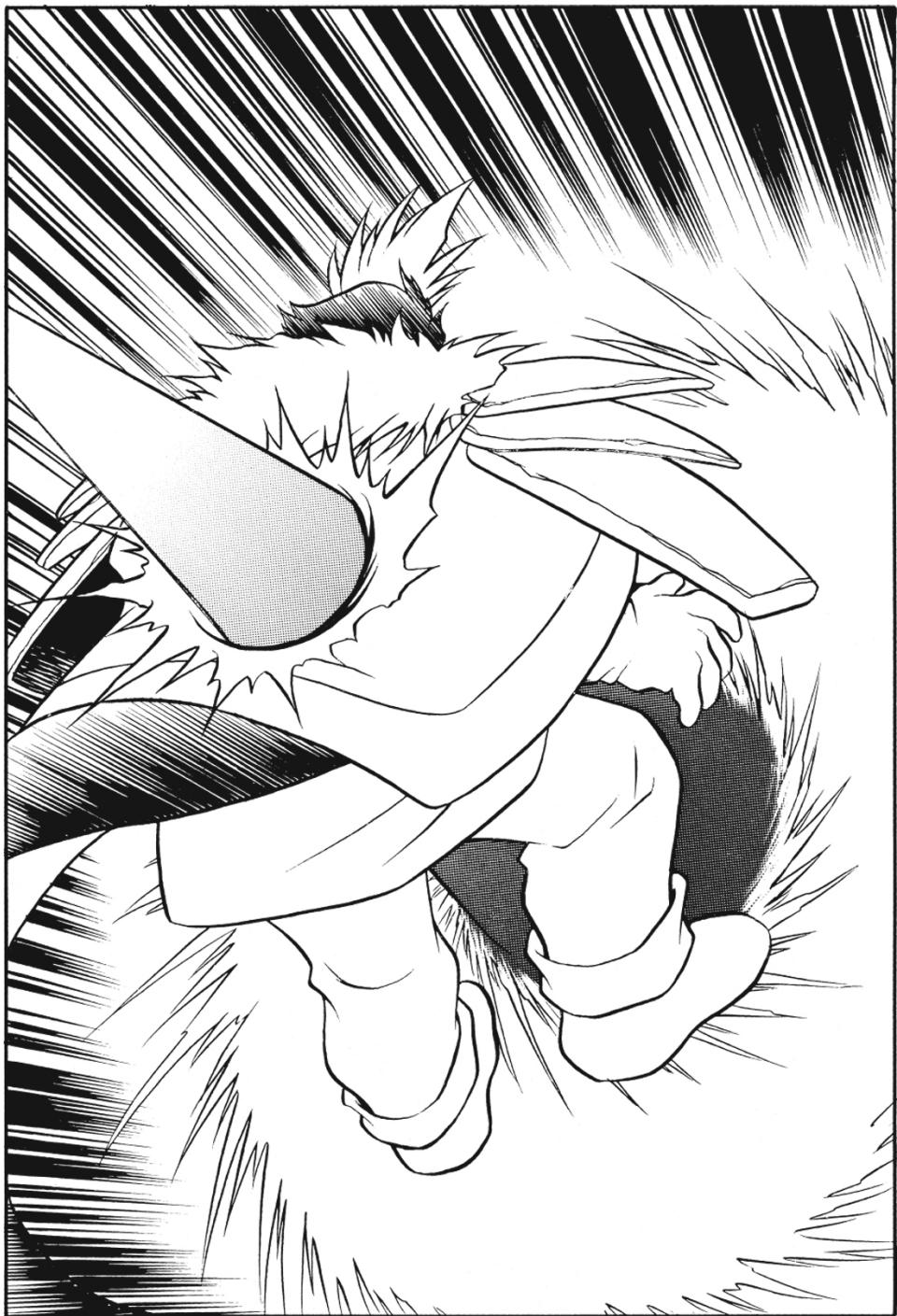
“It’s because... you don’t stand a chance against me on your own.”

Vwomm!

“Graaaaah!” Rashart cried as a second black drill speared him, this time through the chest.

“Chaos Dragon created one Priest and one General to serve as his emissaries... but Greater Beast created only me,” Xellos said casually. “In other words, the same amount of power that Chaos Dragon split between you... Greater Beast imbued in me alone. So to stand a chance against me, the two of you—General Rashart and Priest Raltark—would have to work together... Or Chaos Dragon himself would have to put in an appearance.”

Vwomm! A third black drill skewered Rashart.



Of course... In that moment, I finally realized the nature of the power that Xellos wielded. Those black drills were an expression of it... the power to shatter a target without ever making physical contact. Xellos could warp them through space, penetrate his target with them, and unleash their power from within.

That, or else maybe... were those drills actually Xellos's true form on the astral plane?! I could feel goosebumps rising up all over my body. He was on my side for now, but some day, he would be my enemy. When that time came... would it be possible to beat him?!

With Rashart's body still speared on his black drill, Xellos at last said with a smile, "My, my. I'm sorry to be so rude, but we simply don't have time to waste. It's a shame to say goodbye so soon after meeting... Hahaha."

His laugh was as casual as ever, and as it hung in the air, I heard a familiar voice exclaim from behind us...

"What?!"

Erk... I turned timidly around to see who it was, and, just as I'd feared, I spied none other than Gourry, Zel, and Amelia.

Crap! I'd been too distracted by Xellos to notice them arriving on the scene! It was Zelgadis who'd cried out in disbelief at what he was seeing.

"Oh?" Xellos hummed, momentarily distracted by our new arrivals as well.

By the time I turned back toward the demon brawl, Rashart was gone... leaving Xellos's black drill hovering unadorned in the air.

"Ah, he escaped by making use of such a fleeting distraction. He's not a General for nothing, I suppose," he said almost indifferently, with a shrug. As he was talking, the black drill that had cut quite literally out of thin air dissolved on a passing breeze.

"What just happened?!" Zel harped. "And Xellos! What... What the hell are you?!"

“Are you... a demon?” Amelia whispered breathlessly.

Yeah, no surprises with those reactions. Anyone with the slightest bit of magic knowledge could tell that what he’d just done wasn’t exactly “normal human” stuff...

Xellos cast a silent glance in my direction.

Leaving the cleanup to me, huh?

I let out a soft sigh and said, “Okay, I’ll tell you guys everything I know... but first, we need to get out of this city.”

“I don’t like this,” whispered Zelgadis in expected objection.

The five of us—Xellos included—had departed Gyria and were now holed up in a small hunting cabin we’d found in the foothills some distance from the city. It was here that I’d explained, in fits and starts, everything that had led up to our current predicament.

When I’d realized for sure that Xellos was a demon. That he was trying to take me to the Claire Bible for some yet unknown reason. What happened at the Gyria City palace. That General Rashart really was a demon. That he’d gotten my guard down, locked me in a room, and tried to kill me. That a group of demons had cornered me with indiscriminate attacks. And lastly, that Xellos had come to save me.

My three allies simply listened to my story in silence. It was actually a pretty long time before Zel finally made that first displeased comment.

“So... you basically knew from the start, Lina?” Amelia whispered huskily in turn.

“I had a vague suspicion, I guess.”

“I wish you’d shared it with us,” Zel said unhappily.

I mean, the reason I *hadn’t* was because I knew they’d never play along... But, yeah, *touché*. What I’d done was tantamount to tricking them. I had no excuse.

“Now,” Zel said, turning his eyes from me to Xellos, “what’s your real game, exactly?”

Xellos, who was sitting in a corner of the cabin, responded in the usual fashion, "That... is a secret."

"You...!" Zel shouted, rising to his feet.

"Don't!" I quickly stopped him.

"Why not?!" he demanded.

I hesitated for a minute, then said, "Xellos is... really strong. Probably stronger than all of us here."

My words silenced Zelgadis for the time being. He continued to glare at Xellos, but eventually clicked his tongue and sat back down.

"So..." Amelia asked in a quiet voice, "what do we do now, Lina?"

"I'm going to try to find it... The Claire Bible. I know this is giving Xellos exactly what he wants, but refusing to do it isn't exactly gonna get the other guys off my back... So for now, it's my only recourse," I said, then fell quiet.

"I'm not a fan of giving demons what they want," Zel said contemplatively. "But abandoning this now would feel like turning tail and running, and I don't like that either..."

"Same," Amelia put in. "Now that I know that Master Xellos— Ahem! Now I know that *Xellos* is a demon, an agent of darkness, I cannot simply agree to do his bidding. That said... something does seem to be brewing around you, Lina. I need to find out if it's a force of good or evil, and thus determine whether to assist or stop it! Although, if I'm technically abetting a demonic plot by doing so..." There, she folded her arms and fell deep into thought.

"That leaves..." It was Xellos who broke the new silence. "Master Gourry. What do *you* intend to do?"

"Who, me?" Gourry scratched at his cheek, apparently surprised at being called upon for his opinion. "I mean, nothing's really changed..."

Uh, has too!

"You think nothing's changed, Master Gourry?!" Amelia shouted, bearing down on him. "That man's a demon! A *demon!* A being that dwells in darkness, propagating fear

and ruin! The mortal enemy of all living things! A servant of destruction! We're traveling with something more vile than any vermin!"

"Er, that all seems a bit much..." Xellos whispered.

Meanwhile, the seemingly unfazed Gourry replied, "Well, I've kind of had this feeling he was a demon for a while..."

...

"Whaaat?!" everyone else cried out in shock.



“G-Gourry?! When in the world did you realize?!” I asked.

“Well... the first time I met him, I guess,” he said as if it were perfectly natural. “I don’t know how to put it, but he sort of had that smell to him... I could just tell, you know?”

Man... he was really sharp in the weirdest ways.

“And you’ve ignored it this whole time?!” I barked.

“I didn’t exactly ignore it. But you were pretending like it didn’t matter, so I figured you had a plan.”

Er... I didn’t have a comeback for that. I mean, that basically meant he trusted me, right? That’s... actually kinda nice of you, Gourry!

“Then it seems you’ll continue accompanying Lina either way,” Amelia concluded.

“Well, I *am* her guardian,” Gourry responded, patting me on the head.

“That leaves the matter of what Master Zelgadis and I shall do... and we cannot decide until we know precisely what’s going on,” Amelia whispered, before glaring sharply at Xellos. “So confess, villain! Just what are you up to?!”

It was a nice try, but I knew there was no way Xellos would take the bait.

“I cannot answer that,” he responded. (Called it!)

“Aha, so there’s a *reason* you can’t tell us! Perhaps because you’re using Lina for *evil*, hmm?!” She then declared triumphantly, pointing in an accusatory fashion, “I won’t let you get away with it! If you insist on keeping quiet... I have a few ideas of my own!”

“And what, pray tell, might those be?” Xellos asked, partly in amusement.

Amelia replied with a daring smile, “If you won’t talk... I’ll spend all night whispering to you, ‘Life is wonderful!’”

“Ngeh?!” Xellos grunted in alarm, apparently quite shaken by Amelia’s threat.

“Hah! You demons who feed on negative emotions cannot tolerate paeans to the beauties of life, can you?!”

Actually, I think more than a few non-demons would balk

at that too...

"H-Hellmaster never revealed the details of his plan to me!" Xellos quickly professed.

"He didn't, huh?" Amelia asked with a dubious glare.

"I swear! Four of Ruby-Eye Dark Lord Shabranigdu's five servants—Lord Hellmaster, Lord Deep Sea, Lord Dynast, and Chaos Dragon—created Priests and Generals to act on their behalf. But my own master, Lord Greater Beast, created me alone. Most of the demons' recent doings have been at the behest of Lord Hellmaster. He would normally send his errand Priest to do his bidding, but, well... his servants were all destroyed in the Incarnation War a thousand years ago, you see. It's really quite a bother. Hahaha."

Why are you laughing about that?

"So the job has fallen to me, a servant of Lord Greater Beast. But Lord Hellmaster is a bit of an odd duck in some ways... He'll send me off to do this and that, but never tell me what it's all for."

"Makes sense... You can't spill beans you don't have," Gourry said, apparently taking Xellos at his word.

"What do you think of his story?" Amelia asked, turning to the rest of us without even trying to hide her suspicion.

"We can't exactly trust it, but I doubt we'll be able to get any more out of him," replied Zel.

"Well, I was able to glean a couple of things from what he's already told us," I added.

"Like what?" Amelia asked curiously.

"Like that Chaos Dragon Gaav has been alienated from the rest of the demons, and that he's after me for some reason."

"Ah..." Xellos said, raising his voice in surprise. "How, precisely, did you come to that conclusion?"

"Chaos Dragon is the only one you didn't refer to as 'Lord.'"

"..."

My simple observation left Xellos at a loss for words.

“Plus, you seemed pretty flippant about the guy in your fight with Rashart earlier. Of course, that doesn’t explain where I come in to all this... and what I do next might change depending on what exactly Chaos Dragon is planning,” I continued.

I didn’t know if Chaos Dragon was just on bad terms with his brethren, if he was plotting something even worse than the rest of demonkind, or if his big plan would somehow turn out to be a net positive for us humans... Like I said, how I behaved from here would change significantly depending on that information.

Until recently, his minions had been abiding by a “don’t hurt innocent people” policy, but that didn’t necessarily mean they were on humanity’s side. It could just be that they knew anything too flashy would draw the attention of their enemies—Hellmaster and Xellos. Or perhaps they were merely trying to get on humanity’s good side to exploit them as needed.

The situation in Saillune before and the current happenings in Gyria City didn’t really seem like traps specifically laid out to catch me, but rather existing plots to infiltrate the top ranks of large kingdoms... that I just so happened to barge in on. That suggested their real goal was to get as many humans as possible in their thrall. That way, when the time came—for instance, when a full-on demonic civil war broke out—they could use said humans as sacrificial pawns.

“It seems the only way to get to the bottom of this is to play along,” Amelia whispered, a pained expression on her face.

“Yeah... I don’t like doing a demon’s dirty work, but I still don’t like the idea of running away any better. And, frankly, I’m also pretty curious to see where this is all going. I’ll tag along for now,” Zel added in brusquely.

“Thanks, you guys...”

“Don’t get the wrong idea here, Lina,” Zel clarified. “I said

I'm tagging along for now, but the minute we find out what Xellos's faction and Chaos Dragon are planning... I can't speak for Gourry, but Amelia and I might have to turn on you."

"Yeah... I guess that figures," I whispered.

What would I do if that happened? *Ugh, don't go there, Lina! No borrowing trouble!*

"Either way, no way to go but onward!" I declared. "So spill it, Xellos! Where's the Claire Bible already?!"

"Oh, not far," he responded easily. "She lies just between here and the Kataart Mountains... at Dragons' Peak."

Word had it that Dragons' Peak was home to a good many golden and black dragons. The Gyria City sorcerers' council records mentioned that once long ago, they all took flight for some reason and it blotted out the sky with black and gold.

Other than the deimos dragons that lived strictly in the Kataart Mountains, golden dragons and black dragons were the two most powerful species of dragonkind. A large number of them just happened to cluster on this rather small peak.

I'd always wondered why. It wasn't like this was the only place they could live. I'd met a few golden and black dragons in other locations myself. Some sorcerers theorized that the denizens of Dragons' Peak kept the demons of the Kataart Mountains in check, but given the legends of the demons' overwhelming power... I found it hard to believe any would ever cower in fear of dragons.

So why, then, did the dragons band there? The answer was apparently that they were protecting the Claire Bible. This, of course, begged the question of whether or not they'd be willing to hand it over to a ragtag bunch with a demon like Xellos in tow... But one way or the other, we wouldn't know until we got there.

We'd so far avoided the main thoroughfares on our way to Dragons' Peak, and at present, we were passing through a

vast, nameless forest at the foot of the mountain. You couldn't even call the narrow path we were traveling a road. It wasn't much more than a game trail.

Many branches along the way had clearly been cut down, meaning humans had to use this route too... but I wondered who. Hunters? Or perhaps by the rumored messengers sent from Gyria City?

"By the way, Xellos..." I called to him from behind as we walked, pushing through tall grass and low-hanging branches. "If you demons know the dragons have the Claire Bible, why do you let them keep it? Is there some reason you can't enter Dragons' Peak?"

"Oh, not at all. I've never been told why we let it remain there, but... a book of otherworldly magical technologies is essentially useless to demons. We rely on our innate powers alone, you see, so perhaps it was never considered worth picking a fight over," he said without turning back.

"But you were on a mission to burn its manuscripts, right? You said that even if they weren't a threat to a demon like you, they could be to the lower-ranking ones."

"Only in the hands of humans," he said as he snapped a branch blocking his way. "Dragons have magical power far superior to that of humans, it's true. So if they were to use the information contained within the Claire Bible, they could certainly pose a threat to demons. But perhaps instinctively—or out of faith in their own abilities—they make no attempt to use tools, much less store or pass down magical technologies. In that respect, they're similar to demons. Most of the Claire Bible's knowledge is a proverbial white elephant to them... They watch over it so that it won't fall into reckless human hands, but they have no use for it themselves."

"Hmm, but still—"

"Hey," Gourry piped up, interrupting me. His nose was twitching. "Do you smell something burning?"

"Huh?"

On cue, the group stopped and sniffed at the wind. There was a smell carrying faintly among the green scent of the trees...

“You’re right,” Amelia whispered, and then—

Bwoosh! A howl rose up all around us, and with it, the trees burst into flame!

“What?!” the group shouted in unison as the heat from the blaze swept over us. Xellos alone stood there unperturbed.

“I see... So you’re resorting to this now, are you?” he said, his eyes falling upon an old gentleman standing nearby.

“Raltark?!” Amelia and I cried in the same breath.

Go figure... Dude was planning to roast us all alive. He’d craftily started the conflagration a good distance away so that Xellos wouldn’t notice until it was too late.

“Hmm... it is a bit of a desperate measure, true,” the old man said with a note of self-recrimination as he slowly weaved through the trees to approach us. “I haven’t enjoyed watching you foil all my plans... so I wanted to score a decisive point for our side. First... I think I’ll finish that girl there,” Raltark said, glancing my way.

“What’s going on here?” I called to Raltark loudly. If Xellos couldn’t explain things, maybe this guy would. “Why exactly are you trying to kill me? At least fill me in! Depending on your answer, I might even go along with you!”

“Miss Lina!” Xellos cried out reproachfully.

Oh, shut up. The whole “just shut up and do as I say” bit isn’t some kind of moral high ground!

Raltark kept his eyes on Xellos as he replied to me, “You remember one of our kind called Mazenda, yes?”

“I do.”

“She came to us with certain information, though I know not how she learned it... ‘Hellmaster is up to something. He’s about to put a major plot into motion. I don’t know why exactly, but it hinges on a human named Lina Inverse.’”

Wait, don’t tell me...

“Hold it! You mean the only reason you’re trying to kill me is because of some plot Hellmaster cooked up, the details of which you don’t even know?! That’s nonsense!”

“Hardly nonsense... An abundance of caution, if you will. Though I suppose it’s more or less the same from your perspective,” Raltark admitted readily enough.

You’re kidding me... How unlucky does a girl gotta be to have people trying to kill her out of “an abundance of caution”?

Granted, human life had no value to demons in the first place. This was no different from them saying, “This worm could be the larva of a poisonous insect, so we’d better squash it now.” Except the squasher having a good reason was cold comfort for the squashee!

With little consideration for my irritated internal monologue, Raltark continued his leisurely speech, “We didn’t precisely believe her at first, but eventually Kanzel, who was on an operation in Saillune, reported the arrival of someone by your name. That should have been the extent of your interactions, yet... Kanzel decided he’d eliminate you, just in case. As we all know, he met his end for the trouble. But Kanzel, we thought, killed? By a mere human?

“Someone else killed Mazenda soon after, and the organization we’d sent her to infiltrate fell apart... You were revealed to be involved in that as well, and I decided I wanted to meet you personally. I found Seigram, who burned with hatred for you, and fused him with a human who felt the same way... But I was surprised to find Sir Xellos at your side. I began to wonder if Mazenda’s intelligence was accurate after all—”

“Master Raltark, might I humbly interrupt your attempt to waste our time?” Xellos said quietly, cutting him off.

He was right—this was no time for a long-winded story. The flames cloaking the area were slowly approaching us from upwind. Maybe demons were cultured(?) enough to stand chatting in an inferno, but the rest of us couldn’t

afford to stick around.

“My, I suppose I did drag on a bit there. Regardless, I have no intention of letting the girl go.”

As if on cue, another figure slowly emerged from the flames behind Raltark... It was General Rashart. The last I'd seen him, he was clad in the trademark silver armor of Dils, but he now wore a dark red suit of plate styled after a dragon. The naked blade in his hand was larger than the magic sword he'd wielded before, too. This was most likely the General's true form.

“We meet again, General. You don't look well. Are you in poor health?” Xellos said calmly.

Anger flashed in the General's eyes, but he remained silent as he stood next to Raltark.

Of course, the flames were encroaching all the while. The heat wasn't unbearable yet, but it was getting worse by the second. I'd have loved nothing more than to book it up into the sky, but there was no way we were escaping with Raltark and Rashart watching us. We'd have to wait for Xellos to engage them.

“With Master Rashart in such condition, I don't think the two of you can beat me, even together,” he continued tauntingly.

“I'm quite aware,” Raltark agreed easily. “I was hoping we might at least hold you in place while the girl roasts to death.”

“I fear I can't allow that to happen... Now, please take care of Miss Lina,” Xellos said to the rest of our team without taking his eyes off of our two enemies.

A dark feeling—not quite miasma and not quite hostility—filled the area, pushing back against the choking heat.

Here we go... I thought. And a second later, all three demons were gone. They'd probably chosen to fight where their real forms resided—on the astral side of reality, rather than here on the material one.

“Guys! Let's get a move on while the three of them are off

in their own little world!" I rallied.

"But how, Lina?!" Amelia cried in response. "We don't have time to put this whole fire out, and floating over it with Levitation will cook us alive! You're the only one who can use Lei Wing!"

"Don't worry! If we rustle up a double wind barrier for everyone—with a minor cold spell cast inside for good measure—and then use Levitation on that, our gooses should stay uncooked."

"I see... Like what we did in Sairaag, eh?" Zelgadis whispered in response.

Exactly. Except back then, we'd expected an attack and used defensive magic too...

"What should I do?" Gourry asked.

"Just come along for the ride, man. Though I'll bet Raltark and Rashart brought more with them than just a firestarter. They could have buddies lurking nearby. I'd like someone on standby for attack spells..."

"That'll be your job then, Lina," Amelia said with a wink. "You have the strongest black magic repertoire here. I'll handle the barrier and the cooling. Master Zelgadis, you're in charge of reinforcing the barrier and moving us, okay?"

"Right," Zelgadis responded.

Amelia then began her chant. In a matter of seconds, a rather large wind barrier enveloped the four of us. Zel cast a spell of his own to strengthen it.

There were no signs of new enemies yet, but I knew we couldn't afford to let our guard down. Soon, responding to Zel's control, the wind bubble began to rise up... taking us all with it. It slowly wafted over the flames in the direction of Dragons' Peak.

Looking down from above, we could see the conflagration had already consumed a wide swath of the forest. Darn it... Did these guys not know the meaning of restraint?

Eventually, our bubble arrived over the heart of the inferno, but Amelia's cooling spell kept us from feeling the

heat. I was hoping for smooth sailing from here on out, but...

“They’re here!” Gourry soon shouted as three figures appeared atop the blazing forest!

They were just hovering in the air, silently surrounding our wind barrier. Need I even say it? They were demons. One was clad in what looked like tattered white cloth with a black mask; one looked like thin blue mist with a featureless blue face; one was shaped like a human, but had a transparent body like water or ice. They all looked like small fry, but that was compared to Xellos and his ilk... They could still pose a serious threat to humans.

In terms of numbers—four against three—we had the advantage. In a normal battle, our odds would be pretty good... But right now, I was the only one who could really fight. Zel and Amelia were fully occupied maintaining our barrier, keeping us moving, and keeping us alive. Gourry had a weapon that channeled its wielder’s will into a blade of light capable of cutting through magic and demons, but... legendary though it was, it was still a sword. There wasn’t much he could do to stop attacks from outside our barrier bubble.

Aha, of course... This was the reason Xellos’s playtime pals were comfortable leaving us here. They knew we’d get toasted if we stayed, or caught if we tried to escape. Smart demons. Just destroying our barrier would be enough to send us tumbling into the fire below. We’d be dead for sure.

Gotta get through this somehow! One at a time, Lina!

I fixed my eyes on the white demon ahead of us and began to chant...

“Ragna Blast!” I incanted, throwing my spell at the blue one on my four. Glaring down the one in front was just a feint.

My timing was perfect. Five pillars of darkness appeared out of the air around the blue demon and wrapped its body in tendrils of black plasma. It reeled back, then dissolved into darkness and disappeared. One sucker down!

The white demon and the transparent demon then sprang into action, both of them conjuring up multiple javelins of light—which they hurled right at me! *Zing!* The lights easily penetrated the wind barrier! I quickly moved to avoid them...

“Wagh?!”

But I slipped and fell! Fortunately, that sent the javelins sailing safely over my head.

Ugh... Lemme tell ya, it's hard to get your footing inside a giant bubble. Dodging was gonna be tricky.

Regardless, I started my next chant. As I picked myself up... a blue figure appeared in front of me! Was it the demon from before?! It must have pretended to be defeated, disappearing only to reappear inside the barrier and catch me by surprise! It held up its right palm, which began to glow with magical light...

Slash! The next I knew, the blue demon was bisected vertically!

“Ngyaaah!” With a genuine death rattle, it then shattered into thin air for good.

Obviously, my savior was none other than Gourry! He'd drawn the Sword of Light at some point, and now stood with it at the ready.

“Two to go! Let's make it happen, Lina!”

I nodded and continued my chant. I was really aiming for the white one in front of me this time.

“Dragon Slave!” I shouted.

A pale red light coalesced in front of the demon and...

Bwoosh! A powerful explosion rocked our wind barrier.

But this wasn't over! I was sure I'd seen the demon vanish a split second before the red light focused into a single point. It had probably escaped to the astral plane in the nick of time.

Meanwhile, the transparent demon had taken to trying to get underneath our barrier. I was guessing its plan was to release one of those energy javelins from below.

“Not a chance!” Gourry shouted.

He then thrust the Sword of Light through the bottom of the barrier, firing a series of beams at the transparent demon. It dodged the beams easily enough, but Gourry had successfully driven it out from under us.

In the meantime, I was working on my next chant for when the white demon reappeared. The second I was ready, it did so—inside the barrier, right behind Amelia!

Not good! It's after her instead of me! It was trying to destroy our barrier!

Gourry sensed its presence and whipped around. Perhaps realizing he wouldn't make it in time if he ran, he leveled his sword at the demon—but nothing more. Amelia was right behind his target. If he fired the Sword of Light now, he'd hit her too. Obviously, I was in the same predicament with my spell.

Amelia looked back at the demon. It had just conjured a javelin of light right in front of her eyes, when...

Vwomm! An indescribable noise sounded out, and the white demon's head exploded. The magical javelin disappeared right along with it.

I wasn't sure exactly what had happened. I looked outside the barrier to see the transparent demon floating there, just as confused as I was.

Now!

“Dragon Slave!” I shouted, swallowing the last of our attackers in a burst of crimson.

Rmmmmmm... hrr... At last, the barrier-shaking roar died down.

“Whew...” I exhaled in relief. “Looks like we made it...”

“But Lina, who took out that white one?” Gourry asked.

“Probably Xellos,” I responded. “I’ll bet he had a free moment in his battle with Raltark and Rashart, and managed to lend us a hand from the astral plane...”

A valuable ally to have indeed. If he was guarding me without any ulterior motive, I’d be genuinely grateful...

At any rate, our wind barrier made it safely across the roiling inferno as we sailed toward Dragons' Peak.

"Still not here, huh?" Amelia whispered in utter boredom.

"Still not here," I whispered back softly.

The sky was clear. The morning sun was warm. Before us stretched the large forest, still freshly scorched from the conflagration. Behind us stood a run-down hut-sized charcoal kiln and Dragons' Peak.

Yep, the four of us had made it to the base of the mountain.

Three days had passed since our battle in the forest. A big rain had hit that night and put out the fire, but it had also driven us under the cover of a tree for shelter. We'd set out the following morning and made it here the afternoon of the next day.

Xellos, however, still hadn't shown up. Sick of waiting, we'd come outside to watch for him and mutter about how he was nowhere to be seen. I knew it was unlikely that he'd come walking up either way, and that complaining wasn't going to make him appear any faster... but there wasn't much else to do in a sea of nothing but grass and trees. We were bored.

If we'd wanted, we could've killed time by taking a walk, or going fishing or hunting. But we didn't know where the enemy might be lurking, and it didn't seem wise to just wander around.

"He's still not here yet?" Gourry asked, popping out of the charcoal kiln.

"Nope," I responded, continuing to stare blankly into the forest with Amelia.

He walked up beside me and joined our stare-a-thon, asking, "You think those guys took him out?"

"Not impossible. Either option ain't great for us... Ugh. Guess it's time we start discussing our next move..." I whispered, then let out a lonely sigh.

“Say, Lina, why don’t we head up Dragons’ Peak without him?”

“And do what?”

“Ask them to let us see it, maybe?”

“Yeah, right. The dragons are protecting the Claire Bible. I dare you to waltz up there and say, ‘Gimme!’ Spoiler: they’re not just gonna go, ‘Yeah, sure thing!'”

“But if we explain the situation...”

Hahhh... I let out another deep sigh.

“Look, Gourry... You really think the dragons will accept a naively straightforward explanation like, ‘A demon named Xellos told us to come check out the Claire Bible because he’s got some weird scheme going on, so here we are?’”

“Well... most folks appreciate honesty.”

“Oh, put a sock in it...”

If we kept waiting and Xellos never showed, we could eventually play dumb and wander off. But even then, I doubted the Chaos Dragon faction would just shrug off the whole let’s-kill-Lina business.

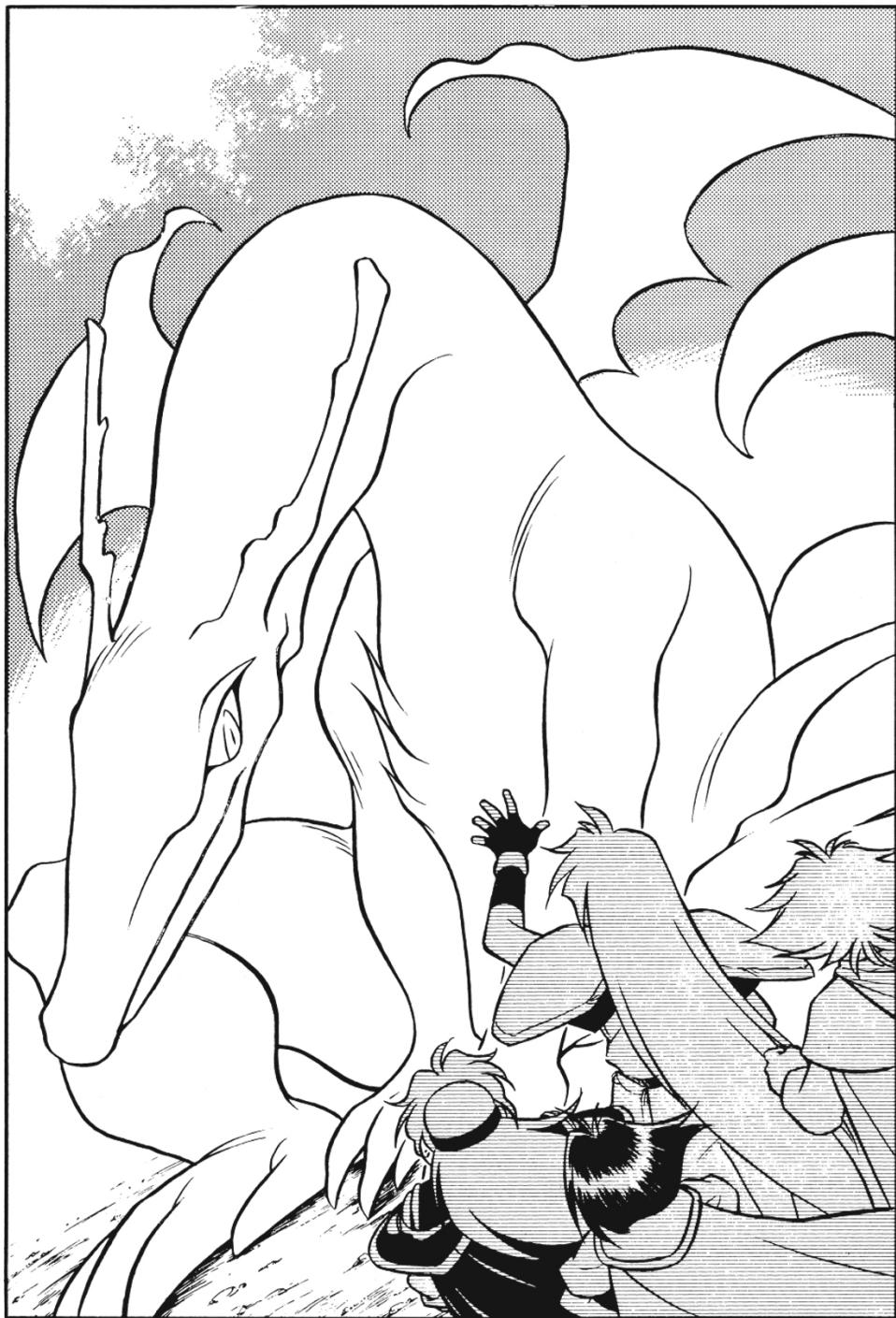
“Let’s wait one more day and—” Amelia started to whisper, when just then...

Whoosh! There was a gust of wind behind us, and a shadow blocked out the sun for a moment. It was followed by the sound of beating wings.

I looked up to see a giant glint of gold—a golden dragon?! It was descending slowly on our location. Hearing the commotion, Zelgadis also emerged from the kiln.

It was on the small side as dragons went, but still plenty powerful enough to honor the golden dragons’ “dragon lord” epithet. It had a body that would take one hell of a sword to even scratch, an intelligent mind that knew the languages of many creatures along with many powerful spells, and laser breath that could cleave a massive red dragon in two in one go...

The dragon craned its neck around, slowly sizing the four of us up.



“What brings you here?” I whispered, and the magnificent creature focused its gaze on me.

“That’s what I’d like to know, humans,” it said in our own tongue. Its diction wasn’t the best, but to be fair, the thing was working with a totally different physiology.

“Wow!” exclaimed Gourry, the only one shocked by this. “Did you hear that?! The dragon talked!”

“Sure did,” I responded coldly to the gawking lug.

“Oh? Is it unusual for a dragon to talk?” the dragon said, seeming more partial to Gourry’s reaction than anyone else’s.

Gourry scratched his head and replied, “Well, I’ve never seen a dragon talk before... How’d you learn to speak human?”

“Ha! We dragons live a long time. We learn the languages of other creatures as a way to entertain ourselves over the course of decades.”

Gourry meditated for a while on the golden dragon’s words, then said, “So you just do it to kill time?”

“Well... we prefer my wording. Now then, humans, what are you doing here? We’ve seen you loitering these last few days. The charcoal makers use this place from time to time, but you don’t look like them. If you have no business here on the mountain of dragons, we’d prefer it if you left.”

At that, our group shared a glance. *Let’s see... how do we explain this one?*

“Um... we’re waiting for someone,” I said before anyone else—specifically Gourry—could speak up. “We got separated from a companion of ours... so we were hoping he’d show up here eventually.”

“You chose this as your meeting place?”

“Er, well... not here specifically. We never really established a meeting place. We just figured he’d come around eventually if we hung out in this area, so...”

“Is this the truth?”

“It is indeed,” called a familiar voice from behind the

golden dragon.

“Xellos!” I cried out instinctively as the black-robed priest stepped leisurely into sight.

“So sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“You’re okay! What happened to the other two?!”

“We were unable to settle the matter. It dragged on for some time, and in the end, they escaped me... I considered giving chase, but I couldn’t risk falling into a trap, now could I? Hahaha.”

Wait... you’ve been fighting all this time?! Until just now?!

“Now, I have a favor to ask you,” Xellos said, turning to the golden dragon. “We have a small matter to discuss with your leader...”

“What is it?”

“Ah, let me see... I’d like to reserve that information for the seniormost dragon possible. Is Milgazia well?”

“The elder? You know the elder?!”

“Oh... we’re old acquaintances, you could say. If you tell him that Xellos is here, I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“Hmm... just who are you?” the golden dragon asked, perhaps realizing that Xellos wasn’t human.

“That’s,” Xellos said, pressing a finger to his lips, “a secret.”

Ah, his secret attack!

The golden dragon looked puzzled for a moment before finally relenting, “Very well. I’ll relay your request to the elder. Wait here.” The dragon then spread its wings again and took off toward the summit.

“You know a big-shot dragon?” Gourry asked.

Xellos replied with a bright smile, “Well, we met once long ago. He’s very steadfast.”

“Wow. You’ve really got some friends in high places, huh?”

“Despite how I may look, I’ve lived a very long time.”

“Say, just how old are you?”

“Hahaha. Now, now, Master Gourry, one mustn’t ask a lady her age.”

Since when are you a lady?!

The absurd conversation continued for a while, Xellos deflecting our questions at every turn, when all of a sudden...

Whoosh! Whoosh! The air around us was abuzz. I looked up and froze in place at the sight.

The sky above us was blotted gold and black. Hundreds, thousands of golden and black dragons flew overhead, thrashing about.

Before long, one of them descended toward us. He was on the large side—significantly longer than the one we'd spoken to before, and at least double its sheer volume. He must have been a thousand years old, or perhaps many thousands...

And at last, he landed—not in front of us, but in front of Xellos. His eyes burned with cagey disdain. He seemed to know exactly what Xellos was.

"It has been quite a while, hasn't it, Master Milgazia?" the demon called out cheerfully.

"Yes, indeed," the golden dragon responded contemptuously. "But certainly not long enough for my liking... Since the Incarnation War, hasn't it, Priest Xellos?"

3: Adrift, the Golden Lord of Darkness

“All right... what do you want?” the golden dragon, Milgazia, asked Xellos grudgingly.

His discomfort was understandable. The aforementioned Incarnation War had, according to legend, pitted the dragons against the demons... meaning he and Xellos would have been enemies then. The fact that he was willing to talk to Xellos now suggested he wasn’t one to hold a grudge. Well, either that, or...

“The truth is, we have a need to access the Claire Bible,” Xellos answered.

“You *demons* do?” Milgazia replied suspiciously.

“Oh, most certainly not. I was hoping this human girl might use it.”

“Human?” The golden dragon elder stared at me for a time before asking Xellos, “What are you plotting, Priest?”

“It’s not my plotting, but Lord Hellmaster’s. Though I fear he didn’t tell me the nature of his plot... You see, I’m only doing as I’m told. A grudging errand boy, if you will.”

“And if I refuse?”

“I’ll simply have to find another way to get what I’m after,” Xellos said, as cool as could be.

Milgazia gazed at him pointedly for a while. “Very well,” he sighed at last. “We cannot stop you from seeking it. Do as you wish.”

“Your cooperation is *most* appreciated.”

“However... I shall accompany you there.”

And with that, the golden dragon elder let out a howl toward the heavens. His form then began to flicker. His body

became a golden mist, which abruptly condensed... And Milgazia now stood before us as a blond, rather handsome middle-aged human dressed in loose-fitting blue clothing.

Aha... That howl must have been the incantation for his transformation spell.

“I’ll show you the way. Come along,” said the human-presenting Milgazia.

The six of us—four humans and two lookalikes—were now walking up the stone mountain road. We’d spent the entire time in silence. I was sure we were all brimming with questions, but the atmosphere wasn’t exactly conducive to conversation.

The dragons were watching us, almost fearfully, from atop cliffs and behind distant rocks. Milgazia led the way without saying a word and without looking back, but his dissatisfaction was rather clear. He almost seemed to be radiating hostility in our direction. His body language was practically screaming, *“Nyah, nyah! You dummy humans working for a demon better not try and talk to me!”*

That intensity put a real damper on the confab, but...

Argh! I just can’t take it anymore!

There was just too much I wanted to ask. And, more than that, I didn’t know how far the walk to the Claire Bible would be. The thought of spending *the entire time* in silence was driving me batty.

Thick as it was, I had to break the ice! But if I addressed the old man out of nowhere, he might just give me the cold shoulder—or even snap back. I wondered if maybe I should take baby steps and try to talk to someone else first.

Yet just as I was thinking that...

“Hey, Xellos,” piped up Gourry out of the blue.

Wait, you’re gonna talk to Xellos first?!

Gourry’s voice triggered a visible twitch in Milgazia’s shoulders. He was probably outraged, thinking, *Did you just try to strike up a conversation behind me?!*

“What is it?” Xellos responded, strikingly laid-back by comparison.

“Are you, like, super old or something?” Gourry asked casually.

Splat! Amelia, Xellos—the one on blast here—and I all took a group faceplant.

“Where... Where did that come from?” Xellos asked as he heaved himself up.

Gourry simply scratched his head thoughtfully as he replied, “Well... that dragon guy said something about the Incarnation War, and it seemed to me I’d heard about that somewhere before. So I’ve been thinking... That was a long time ago, right?”

“Er... one-thousand-and-twelve years, to be precise.”

“Right? So that makes you over one-thousand-and-twelve years old. I get that you don’t want to tell people your real age, but you probably don’t need to be so self-conscious about it. You don’t look a day over a thousand! If you’d asked me, I would’ve said you were in your twenties.”

What Gourry was saying was beyond preposterous. Demons’ appearances didn’t change as they aged, and it was highly questionable that the way Xellos appeared to us was the “real” him in the first place.

“Well... thank you very much,” Xellos said blankly, understandably at a loss for how to respond.

The next thing I knew, Milgazia had stopped, turning to stare at Gourry in disbelief.

Yes! Now’s my chance to talk to him!

“Don’t let it bother you, sir. He’s just, you know... like that.”

“Ah... yes,” the dragon responded vaguely before he began walking again.

“But if I might ask... how do you and all these dragons survive here? What do you eat?” I said, trying to sound as breezy as possible as I inquired about what I’d been wondering all this time.

I mean, Dragons' Peak was basically a big, bald rock. There was little in the way of soil or sizable trees. Sure, there were probably berries you could pick and small animals you could hunt, but it was hard to imagine a clan of dragons surviving on that alone.

"We don't require much food to begin with," he responded.

Okay, color me surprised. I was half expecting him to hiss that it was none of my business... Granted, his tone did still have a bit of an edge to it.

"Dragon children need to eat as much as any other being, but as we mature, we learn how to sate ourselves on wind and sunlight. We do eventually need to eat, but it's easy to go without food for a month or two. Consider—if all the world's dragons constantly consumed in proportion to our size, we'd have rendered the land barren long ago, correct?"

"I see... That does make sense."

"Now, a question for you, human girl."

"I'll try my best to answer."

"You know that Xellos is a demon, and that he's plotting something. Yet you cooperate. Why?"

"Well... it's the only way for me to stay alive right now. I don't know what Xellos and Hellmaster Fibrizo are planning, but there's another faction that *also* doesn't know what they're planning... and they want to kill me in order to stop whatever it is. I know Hellmaster's plan likely won't be about achieving world peace or showing love for all living things—and in that sense, the people trying to kill me might be completely justified—but I'm afraid I'm not an enlightened enough being to just roll over and die for something I don't yet understand."

"Living things will try to keep living—that's the law of nature. It's nothing to be ashamed of," Milgazia said. His tone was offhand and he still didn't deign to look at me, but... was that a newfound gentleness I sensed in his voice?

"I don't intend to remain a pawn forever," I clarified.

“But... if I quit playing along now, I’ll never understand what’s going on. I doubt my would-be assassins will stop trying to kill me if I back off, either... They’ll keep coming ‘just in case’ and, sooner or later, they’ll succeed. Besides, there’s no guarantee that my death will put a stop to Hellmaster’s plans. Which means walking away without ever learning the truth would just mean getting offed for nothing.”

“Are you certain you should be saying this in his presence?” Milgazia asked, indicating Xellos with his eyes as he finally turned to face me.

“Oh, don’t mind me. I know Miss Lina well enough to presume she’s thought that much through,” Xellos responded airily.

“Hmm...” The golden dragon elder pondered for a while. “My concern is... Lina, was it? Human girl, are you one of the seven parts of Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu?”

“What?!” I squealed in shock.

Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu, AKA the Dark Lord of our world... Legend held that he was sealed away in seven fragments eons ago after a deathmatch with the god of our world, Flare Dragon Ceifeed. Ceifeed was grievously injured in the battle, and left behind four avatars before disappearing. Meanwhile, the Dark Lord’s minions were scattered across the globe.

As for the fragments, one was believed to have revived a thousand years ago during the Incarnation War. That was in the Kataart Mountains, where it destroyed Ceifeed’s avatar Aqualord, protector of the North. And then, a little over a year ago, I personally witnessed the unsealing of a second fragment. That still left five out there... Could I really be one of them?!

“What... What are you saying?” I asked hoarsely after a long pause.

“You humans know that Ruby-Eye was divided into seven parts and sealed away, don’t you?”

“Well... it’s a famous story, yes.”

“It appears Ceifeed sealed Shabranigdu into human souls. When one human host dies, the Dark Lord fragment moves to another. The seals might have been harder within dragons or elves, but I believe Ceifeed chose humans specifically for their brief lifespans. The repeated reincarnation should gradually purify the Dark Lord fragments and, in time, destroy them.

“Yet... because humans are such fragile creatures, certain things can weaken a seal. And when that happens... Hellmaster, who has the ability to perceive the cycle of reincarnation, will see it immediately. He might well take action to undo it completely.

“In truth, a thousand years ago during the Incarnation War, he was the one who unsealed the fragment in the Kataart Mountains. So if he has some new plan in the works now... Well, you can see why one might wonder.”

“You think... the Claire Bible could be the key to unlocking the seals?” I asked, still muted.

But Milgazia replied with a slow shake of his head, “No... the Claire Bible is merely a font of knowledge from another world. If, hypothetically, you *are* one of the Dark Lord’s fragments, then the mere act of perceiving it wouldn’t break the seal... though it might serve as a step in that direction. Of course, it’s also possible that Hellmaster’s plan has nothing to do with this.”

“Either way, we won’t know what’s in the box until we open the lid...”

“Indeed. But fret not. If you determine what to do and when—and believe in yourself—you shall find your way out of anything. Ah, here we are,” Milgazia said, coming to a stop at a seemingly unremarkable spot.

We’d been walking up a rather wide slope. To our right was a sheer cliff, and to our left a grove of trees backed by another hill so steep it might as well have been a cliff.

“Where... exactly?” I asked, looking around in confusion.

“Our destination,” the golden dragon elder responded

calmly. Then, without a sound, he vanished halfway into the sheer rock wall to our right. "The Claire Bible is through here. It may look solid, but you can pass through it. Come with me, human girl Lina. The rest of you should wait here."

At this, the group exchanged looks.

"Why just Lina?" Amelia asked.

Milgazia reappeared fully on our side of the wall and explained, "I promised the Priest that I would take this girl to the Claire Bible. I have no wish to guide any other humans there. You may follow me if you so desire, but I will take no responsibility should you get separated."

"Separated? Is it like a maze in there or something?" Gourry asked this time.

"An infinity of paths, one might say. I only know the way there and back myself. But while the path is perceptible to demons and dragons, a human might lose their way, never to return."

Gourry, Zel, and Amelia looked at each other a little while longer.

"Okay, Lina, we'll wait here."

"Take care."

"Bring back souvenirs!"

C-C'mon, you guys... Well, okay, I guess going as a big group wouldn't really help things...

"Xellos, please remain here and see that they don't change their minds," Milgazia instructed.

"Very well," Xellos agreed lightly.

"W-Wait, Xellos, you're staying behind? What am I supposed to do when I get to the Claire Bible?"

"Really now... my only duty was to see you safely here. I've fulfilled that role to the letter, so it hardly matters to me what you do next," Xellos responded bluntly and breezily.

Darn it, he really was just a grudging errand boy... Fine. I'd see this through myself then.

"All right. Let's proceed, human girl Lina," Milgazia invited.

I nodded and took his hand.

The moment I passed through the rock wall, I was seized by a strange sensation. I don't know how to describe it. It was like my body was no longer my own... No, that wasn't quite it. The right words elude me. It was like nothing I'd ever felt before.

"What is this place?" I asked as I followed Milgazia through the strange space.

It was just as hard for me to understand as it was to describe. One moment it was a rocky cave, but if I let my mind wander or looked away for a second, it became a sparkling crystal passageway, a featureless metal corridor, the intestines of a great beast...

"Don't let it bother you," said the golden dragon elder, suddenly inverted before my eyes. I wasn't sure if he was really upside down, or if it was an optical illusion.

"Easier said than done..." I blinked to find Milgazia right side up again—but instead of right in front of me, he was now so far ahead that he looked to be ant-sized. Yet in spite of that, I could still feel his hand firmly in mine. It was kinda hard *not* to be bothered.

"Trust in the feeling of your hand. Your other senses will deceive you," he said.

With that, I looked at my left hand. I followed his arm with my eyes, up to his shoulder, and then... he seemed to be right in front of me again.

"This space appeared with the Claire Bible a thousand years ago, right around the time of the Incarnation War," he said. "It was most likely formed by distortions in spacetime caused by the power clash between Ruby-Eye and Aqualord. It is fundamentally similar to the astral plane."

"How so?"

"It's not your eyes and ears that perceive it, but your spirit. Feelings of fear can turn paradise into the very vision of hell, and soft breezes into the screams of the damned."

Feelings of hostility can kill their targets, and self-directed despair can bring your body to ruin.”

Right... In short, it was a world where those with the strongest wills survived.

“Of course, it’s only *similar*. Even a demon of insufficient power could find themselves lost here forever. The same is true of dragons...”

“Um... please don’t get lost?”

“I’m afraid it’s too late.”

“Whaaaaaaaaat?!”

“Just kidding.”

You, you... You old rascal!

“Well, forgive me for being an old rascal.”

Ah... He read my mind. I guess I’d better not think anything too weird, like that golden dragons can go [BLEEP] themselves or that they’re all just a bunch of [BLEEPS]...

“Do you want me to leave you here?”

“Just kidding. Anyway, how much farther to the Claire Bible?”

“Not far. But... what is it you seek to do with the otherworldly knowledge you gain from it?”

“Well... like I said, I don’t want to be Hellmaster’s or Xellos’s puppet forever. That means I’ll probably have to fight them someday, so I’d like to have a nice trick up my sleeve for when the time comes.”

“It likely won’t help,” the golden dragon elder said wearily.

“Not fair to say that before I even try...”

“Even if you acquire such knowledge, there are hard limits to the power a human can bring to bear. You could not defeat Xellos, let alone Hellmaster, in any kind of direct clash.”

“Well, I understand that Xellos is pretty strong, but—”

“You do not understand.” Milgazia let out a truly long sigh. “Why do you think I acquiesced to his request to bring you here so readily?”

“I’m betting it’s not because you’re old friends, is it?”

“It’s because I fear him.”

Wait...

“Huh?”

I couldn’t believe my ears. An elder of the golden dragons—of the dragon lords—*afraid*?!

“A thousand years ago, the one who drove the dragons to the brink of annihilation... It was Xellos, acting entirely on his own.”

I couldn’t speak. What Milgazia was saying had me gobsmacked.

“Had I refused him, he likely would have guided you to the Claire Bible himself, slaying every golden and black dragon on this peak in his search for the path... It would not have been easy, I daresay, but he likely would have succeeded. And as I have no wish to see my kin die in the name of a pointless resistance, I acceded.”

That was... preposterous. I’d heard stories about a single demon overwhelming the dragons during the Incarnation War... but I’d always assumed that was an exaggeration. To find out it was true, much less that it was *him*...

I mean, I knew Xellos was strong, but... *that* strong?

“Your bravery is admirable, but you could not beat them in a fight. Outwitting them, however... that may be possible, depending on your methods.”

“...I’ll try my best...” I responded, disheartened.

We fell into silence for a time. Not long after, Milgazia came to a stop.

“Now... here it is,” he said.

I stopped too, but as I glanced around, I couldn’t see anything that looked like a bible. The bizarre, incomprehensible space around us seemed completely empty.

“Er... where, might I ask?”

“Here,” he said lightly, pointing.

Nope, still not seeing it!

“Um...” I said uncertainly.

The golden dragon elder thought for a moment, then said, “Hmm... human eyes can’t perceive it, then? In that case... Ah, yes, try to ‘feel’ for it. See if you can sense its presence.”

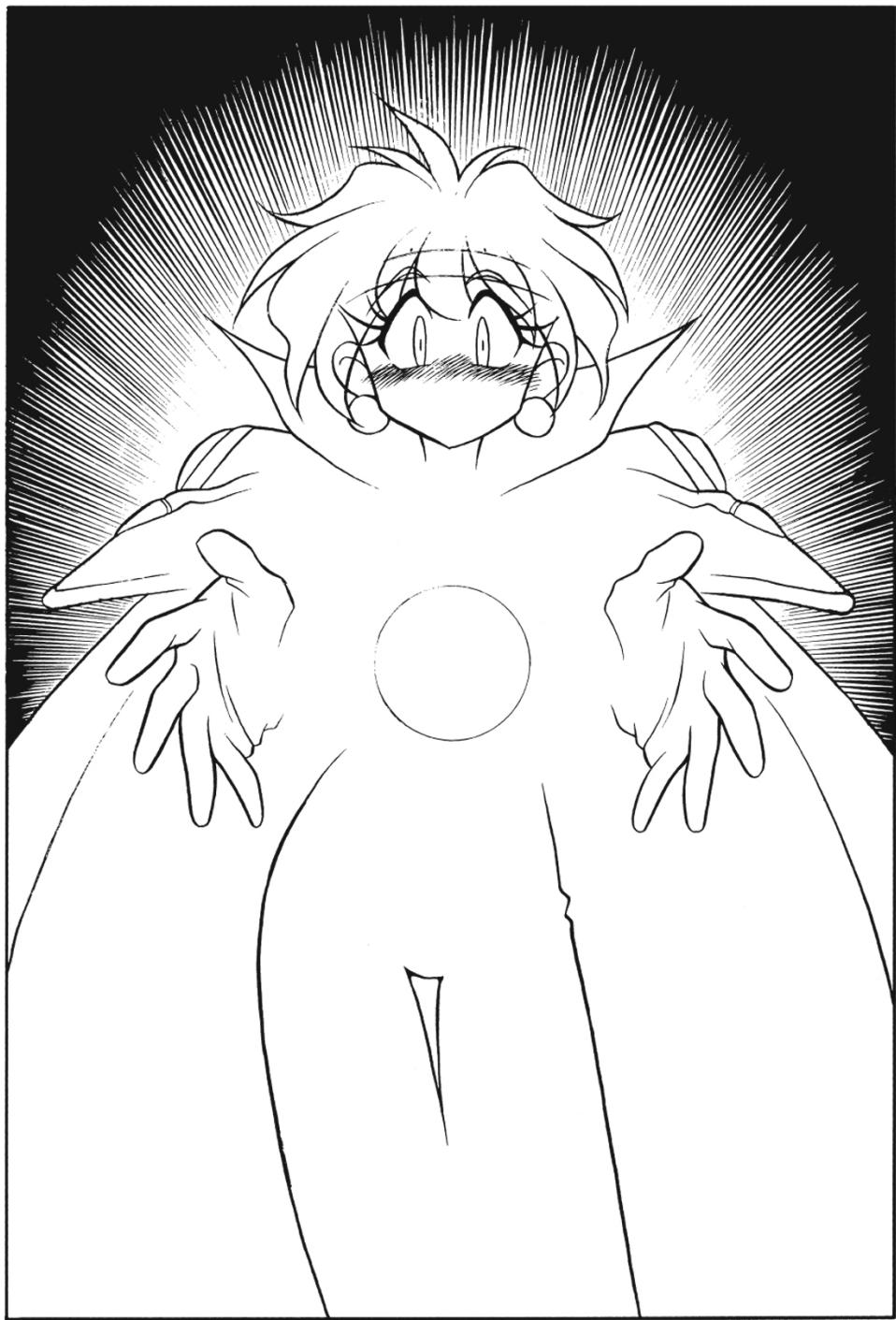
“Uh-huh...” I responded vaguely, then turned back in the indicated direction. *“Feel” for what, exactly?*

Milgazia said that I wouldn’t be able to see it, so as silly as this all seemed, I tried closing my eyes, and...

There it was.

I quickly opened my eyes again. As before, the space was empty. I still couldn’t see it per se... but this time I could *feel* something there for sure. It was an orb just big enough to fit in both my hands.

“This... orb?” I whispered, gently touching it with my open right hand.



Just then...

“This is no mere orb. It is the epicenter of a spacetime disruption through which a torrent of otherworldly information flows. It is what you call the Claire Bible,” replied a voice, barely audible.

“Huh?” Reflexively, I released the orb and turned back toward Milgazia. “Did you just say something?”

“No. You may have heard the voice of the Claire Bible. I didn’t hear anything,” he said simply enough.

“Huh...”

So we had ourselves some kind of talking trivia orb, did we? Except if Milgazia hadn’t heard its “voice,” that meant it was speaking directly into my mind or my spirit.

I reached out again with my right hand... But I waited, and the orb said nothing this time.

Darn it... What's got your tongue now, punk?

“You’re not trying to learn anything,” the erstwhile silent voice replied immediately.

“Gwuh?!” I shouted out in surprise. “Ah... you startled me. Does this mean you—if you count as a ‘you’—will answer the questions I ask?”

“Correct.”

“I see, I see...” I said, nodding quickly.

I was betting I looked pretty silly to Milgazia, who couldn’t hear the Claire Bible’s voice, but I couldn’t get hung up on appearances right now. I knew I could probably just ask the orb questions in my head, but talking out loud helped me to better channel my thoughts.

“Okay, then let’s do this... First, do you know what Hellmaster is planning?”

“No,” it responded bluntly. (To be fair, I hadn’t gotten my hopes up on that one.) “I cannot convey to you the thoughts and feelings of other beings. I can only convey knowledge.”

“Figured as much. In that case...” I paused for a minute, then asked my biggest request mentally. *Tell me everything you know about the Lord of Nightmares.*

This was it—my main reason for wanting to find the Claire Bible. It could be my ace in the hole against Hellmaster, Xellos... all of them.

Milgazia's tale, combined with my own experience, made it very clear that even a series of Dragon Slaves wouldn't so much as scratch a being of Xellos's caliber. But if I could safely and reliably call upon the Lord of Nightmares, greatest of all dark lords, who I'd first learned of in Gyria City... that might just be enough to turn the tables.

In order to make the spell more stable, however, I needed to know more about the Lord of Nightmares itself. The generational recitation of a Claire Bible manuscript I'd overheard in Gyria wasn't to be trusted. To be fair, I'd already been able to use the spell twice with it... so it was either a *really good* recitation, or the Lord of Nightmares was just that capricious.

Fortunately, the real Claire Bible here should be able to give me some genuine answers.

"Its existence is too massive to comprehend. Even I, what you call the Claire Bible, grasp only a sliver. But I will tell you what I know. It is—

"The mother of all darkness—the true sovereign of demons—that which seeks a return to old—blacker than darkness—deeper than night—Sea of Chaos—gold adrift—all-consuming emptiness..." the Claire Bible continued, now speaking in fragments. "The source of all chaos—Its name—the Lord of Nightmares."

And then... the voice went quiet. This didn't feel right. I couldn't figure it out. I felt like I'd committed some kind of fundamental misunderstanding.

Once more, please... Tell me about the Lord of Nightmares.

In response to my mental prompting, the orb once again recited the same string of fragments, in the same order...

Huh?

Only then did it hit me.

Once more! From the beginning!

The voice repeated the same words over in my mind, concluding once again, “Its name—the Lord of Nightmares.”

No way... I felt my mouth go dry. The fragments the orb spoke began to coalesce around a certain image in my mind. *Could the Lord of Nightmares be...*

“Correct,” the Claire Bible responded, reading the last words of my thoughts.

You’re kidding... I could feel my legs quaking beneath me. I’d been casually casting spells from the power of *that*!?

Everything suddenly made sense. Why Sylphiel, a cleric we’d traveled with once, had forbade me from using Giga Slave. Why a demon of Xellos’s power feared the Lord of Nightmares’ very name.

This was *definitely* enough to do what I needed. That much, I was sure of. But...

“What is it? What happened?”

I snapped back to my senses when I felt someone shaking my shoulder. I turned back to see Milgazia standing behind me.

“What is it? What were you told?” he asked.

“Oh, I... er...” I hemmed, forcing a smile.

“Are you all right? You don’t look well...”

“To be honest, I don’t feel well... but I can keep going,” I said, reaching back for the unseen orb.

Now that *that* was off the table, it was time to look for another key to my demon-slaying puzzle. I also wanted to ask how to restore Zel’s humanity. This was no time to space out in shock over what I’d just learned.

First, the demon-fighting...

“Is there a way to surpass the power of demons?” I inquired aloud.

“To surpass the power of a demon, you must wield a power greater than theirs,” it answered in tautological fashion.

Yeah, shame on me for asking...

“Is there any way for a mortal human to possess power sufficient to defeat a demon?” I tried to clarify.

“Only by using tools and spells that pull from God, or a more highly-ranked demon than the one you face. But there are limits, even then. And because divine power does not reach this land, you cannot use spells that pull from God.”

“Divine power doesn’t reach here? Why not?”

“During the Incarnation War, in order to destroy Aqualord, the revived Dark Lord of the North placed Hellmaster, Deep Sea, Greater Beast, and Dynast at the Desert of Destruction, the Demon Sea, Wolfpack Isle, and the Northern Pole to create a barrier seal. That is how Aqualord was destroyed, and why the other Lords’ powers cannot reach this land.”

I had no idea...

“Okay, in that case... is there a way for a human to use the Sword of Light to defeat a powerful demon?”

“The Sword of Light is your name for Gorun Nova. Should you draw out all of its power, then—”

The voice suddenly cut off as Milgazia snatched my hand away from the orb.

“What are you—” I started to ask, but I immediately realized why he’d done it. As my body fell backward, I felt something invisible brush just past my chest—right through where I’d been standing a moment ago.

“Why did you save her, golden dragon elder?” came a voice I recognized from literally nowhere.

“Raltark?!” I shouted into the void.

As if in answer, a vague mist appeared a little to my right, taking a humanoid shape.

“What a curious space this is. It took me some doing to find you,” said the fuzzy image of Raltark before me.

I didn’t know if this was his true form, or if he just looked that way because of this weird place. He’d probably realized that we were after the Claire Bible, and had come to find it from another direction.

“You should know, golden dragon elder, that there’s a

chance this girl is serving Hellmaster's interests. I really should dispose of her now, just in case. Do you mind?" the demon asked as casually as if he were putting in a dinner request.

If Milgazia agreed to this, I was toast. But...

"Before I give you my answer, one thing," he said. "If this girl chooses to defy Hellmaster and Xellos... you wouldn't have to kill her anymore, would you?"

"I'm afraid I still would. Until I know the nature of Hellmaster's plot, or what role the girl plays in it, she remains a potential threat whose continued existence I cannot allow. After all, your suggestion itself might yet be a part of his plan."

"Hmm, I see..." Milgazia thought for a moment before nonchalantly refusing, "Then I cannot let you have her."

Yeah! Score!

"Oh... can't you? And why is that? Don't tell me that you, too, plan to side with Hellmaster and Xellos."

"No. But Xellos is on Dragons' Peak at the entrance to this place as we speak. Should anything happen to the girl, there's no telling what he might do. He might slay all of my brethren to punish me."

"Make an excuse, then. Tell him that I, Priest of the Dragon, spirited her away before you could act."

"There are other reasons for my refusal."

"Oh?"

"It's your methods... killing this girl 'just in case,' without knowing the true situation."

"You think we're wrong to do so?"

"I don't know, but I don't *appreciate* it. Your comrade, General Rashart, approached us with an offer. 'Fight Ruby-Eye with us in Kataart,' he said. For a time, I thought that if we—the dragons, the elves, the humans, and you—joined forces, such a thing might indeed be possible."

"But this incident has clarified things for me. The fact that you would so happily take another life 'just in case' tells me

that even if we did fight the Dark Lord of the North together, you'd merely be using us as shields. That is why I don't appreciate it, and why I cannot indulge your request."

"We would never use the dragons as shields, although the humans are a different story."

"They're equally condemnable."

"Hmm..." Raltark seemed troubled by Milgazia's words. "I truly don't understand... To fight together means to combine our strengths. And humans, with their numbers and their inability to harm demons, naturally make the best choice as shields. What does it matter to you how we treat humans, anyway?"

"The real problem is how you can say such things without the slightest remorse. Even if your quarrel now is with Ruby-Eye, it tells me that you demons are still our enemy. Beings with hearts, and those without... Those that strive for a continuation of existence, and those that strive to end it... We're simply incompatible. That is also the greatest reason I cannot kill this girl—because she's trying to stay alive."

"Hmm... you leave me no choice," Raltark said. He then declared with perfect confidence, "I shall simply have to kill her without your permission. For all your claims, you don't actually have a way to stop me, do you? Even if you sacrificed your own life..."

But the golden dragon elder countered with equal confidence, "Not so. There's always a way—a ray of hope—no matter how faint it might be."

"Oh? Now you have me curious."

"It won't be a very interesting show, I'm afraid. I'm just going to do... this," Milgazia said, releasing my hand and giving me a shove.

"Huh?" I stumbled a few steps, then looked back...

But the Claire Bible, Milgazia, and Raltark were gone.

"Um..." For a second, I just stood there, uncertain of what had happened. The golden dragon elder pushed me, and then everyone was... "Oh, I see."

It finally hit me. They weren't the ones to disappear; *I* was. Milgazia had cast me out into the infinite labyrinth that even demons struggled to navigate in order to keep me out of Raltark's grasp—at least for now—and avoid an ensuing fight.

Pretty clever. Now, that just left me to... uh... do *what*, exactly?

Milgazia himself only knew the way in and the way out, which meant he wasn't going to be able to find me either. And then he'd said, "There's always a way—a ray of hope—no matter how faint it might be..."

H-Hold on! He wasn't telling me to find my way back on my own, was he?! What was I supposed to do in a place that baffled even demons, where I couldn't even tell ahead from behind?!

Or... maybe Milgazia was planning to get back to Xellos and ask him to find me. That would be better than counting on me to wander my way out, at least...

But in that case, it was a race against time. Would Milgazia make it back, explain everything, and get Xellos to find me first? Or would Raltark discover me before then? Xellos was much more powerful, although Raltark had a considerable lead on him.

And while I was thinking about all that...

"This way," came Xellos's voice, seemingly from nowhere.

"Huh?"

I quickly looked all around, but saw nothing. Even when I closed my eyes, I felt nothing in the area. And yet... for some reason, I could tell exactly where the voice was coming from.

It seemed a little too soon for Xellos to have found me, but I couldn't trust my sense of time in this bizarre place. Maybe what felt like only a few seconds for me had actually been hours or even days.

"Is that you, Xellos?" I called.

"This way," the voice repeated, not responding to my question.

I hesitated. That was definitely Xellos's voice, but how was I to know it wasn't another demon mimicking him? It was possible I'd follow it only to find a grinning Raltark waiting for me.

On the other hand, it could legitimately be Xellos. You don't get very far in life if you're afraid to take a little risk... But on the other *other* hand, my neck was on the line here, you know?

I turned the matter over in my head a little while longer. *Nah, better go for it*, I concluded at last.

"This way."

I started walking, following the intermittent voice. My surroundings, seemingly rock when I was with Milgazia, were now made of some material I couldn't quite identify. How long would I have to walk through all this?

Suddenly, someone grabbed my hand.

"Good. Well done," said a figure in black as he appeared in front of me—trademark smile and all.

"That was fast, Xellos."

"I came just as soon as Master Milgazia told me. I'm just glad you're all right. Now, where is Raltark?"

"I don't know. He might still be around, or he might have run off..."

"Either way, let us return to the others."

"You don't have to take me back to the Claire Bible?"

"I don't think so... I already delivered you once as ordered, and I've received no further instructions. So I'm sure it's fine."

Boy... what a slacker.

"There's more I wanted to ask it, though..."

I hadn't gotten a full explanation on the Sword of Light, and I also hadn't gotten around to asking about how to restore Zelgadis's humanity.

"But if Raltark and Rashart were to appear here together, I'm not entirely confident I could protect you. Under normal conditions, I would send you to safety while I fought them..."

but if we're separated here, it's very possible that one of the two could break away in time to find you before I do."

"Ah... good point." There was still so much I wanted to learn, but the risk was too high if Raltark was still hanging around. "Okay. Let's head back for now."

"Very well."

Xellos led me by the hand and I followed passively behind him.



Eventually, after a bit more walking... I felt a faint sense of vertigo, and the scenery opened up before my eyes. I was back on the stone mountain path, surrounded by familiar faces.

"Hey. I'm back..." I said as I waved.

"You're safe, Lina?!" Gourry asked first.

"Seems so, thanks to Milgazia and Xellos," I responded with a smile. "Unfortunately, Raltark showed up and cut my session short... But, hey, the Claire Bible's not going anywhere! Once things have calmed down a little, maybe—"

"Get down!" Gourry cried out suddenly, tackling me to the ground!

Just then—*Fwoom!*—a huge explosion erupted from within the rock wall that led to the Claire Bible. But before any shrapnel could hit us, it was deflected in random directions. Xellos must have erected a barrier.

As the echoes of the explosion died down, a figure slowly approached, emerging from the dust.

"You're really..." I coughed, "persistent this time... Raltark!"

"Indeed... it appears that I have little time to lose," he responded, but there was none of the usual confidence on his face. "I think we ought to finish this now... Don't you agree, Sir Xellos?"

"Why, certainly, Master Raltark... and Master Rashart."

"You seem rather assured of your chances," called a new voice from behind us.

I turned back to find General Rashart standing there. He was armed with his silver sword and decked in his dragon armor.

"But I've recovered from what you did to me. We're evenly matched now," he said before turning to Milgazia, who'd returned at some point. "You won't be interfering, will you?"

"I have no intention of doing so," the golden dragon elder replied calmly. "It's one thing to intervene in the slaughter of the powerless, but I see no need to take sides in a battle

between demons.”

Hang on a sec. Did that mean he saved me back at the Claire Bible because he thought I was powerless? Fair enough, I guess... Compared to someone like Raltark, I was.

“I’d have preferred not to harm the rest of you, but...” Raltark said, looking over the group. “Just so you know, after we finish off Xellos, you’ll be the next to die. You’ve aided him and hindered Sir Rashart and myself far too often. But with your permission, I’d like to offer you this while we finish our business with him.”

With that, Raltark held his right hand straight out, palm facing downward. A yawning black hole formed in the rocky ground just beneath. Two large spheres, each with a circumference of about a human arm span, slowly emerged. One was pale gray, the other dazzling red. They rose up to about Raltark’s chest height, where they bobbed unsteadily in the air. The hole in the ground then closed behind them.

They just looked like large globes, but I knew precisely what they really were.

“More demons, huh?”

“Not much to look at, I know... But more powerful than Guduza and Duguld, I assure you. I’d love it if you could introduce yourselves... but I’m afraid you’ll find mutual communication beyond you.”

“Fine by me... We won’t know each other long either way.”

“Indeed you won’t... Now, let us begin,” Raltark called.

Those words were the signal for the commencement of hostilities.

4: And Now... Chaos Dragon

General Rashart made the first move.

“Let’s go!” he roared, charging Xellos with his sword at the ready. Whatever he had planned this time, it seemed he was going to keep it here on the material plane.

Crack! With a small yet solid sound, Xellos parried the blow with the staff in his right hand. At the same time, he extinguished the walnut-sized energy balls coming at him from the left (courtesy of Raltark) by enveloping them in his cape.

Incredible... My eyes went wide in surprise. I’d assumed this would be the kind of battle where crashing waves of power sent sparks flying and deflected magic blasts took chunks out of the landscape... Just a big ol’ spectacle, you know? But, to be frank, this was shaping up to be a perfectly straightforward fight.

Still, it didn’t look like either side was holding back. There was just shockingly little excess in their power usage.

The most likely explanation was that they were trying to avoid collateral damage, since an all-out battle between these guys would probably end up obliterating the whole freakin’ mountain. Xellos didn’t want us to get hurt, and Raltark and Rashart didn’t want to do anything that might turn the dragons against them.

But while the fight that I could follow—the attack-blocking and the spell-sealing—continued to play out, it seemed the demons were now engaging on the astral plane as well. Once in a while, I’d catch a glimpse of a black drill flitting in and out of existence above Raltark’s head. Or the sword in Rashart’s hand would seem to blur for a second. Or Raltark would let out a pained groan... I could imagine that

some sort of back-and-forth was transpiring; I just didn't have the details.

Granted, I didn't exactly have time to kick back and watch them fight. The red and gray orbs were headed toward the rest of us, albeit slowly. I figured these were demons Raltark had dragged here from the astral side of reality. Gourry and I had fought these more abstract creatures once before in Saillune, but judging by the uncertainty on Amelia and Zel's faces, this was their first time.

"Watch out, Zel! Amelia! They might look a little silly, but they're probably tough!" I cautioned.

"Obvious enough, but..." Zel mumbled.

"I still don't really wanna fight them," Amelia responded.

With that, they both broke into chants. Meanwhile, Gourry drew the Sword of Light, and I started working on a spell of my own.

"Elemekia Lance!" Amelia incanted first.

And the moment she let it fly, the gray orb dipped down to intercept its trajectory. *Pwash!* The spear of light soaked directly into it, and in that same moment, the red one fired out multiple spears of light—straight at Zelgadis!

"Astral Vine!" he cried, using his spell to infuse his sword with magic. He then either dodged or cut down the inbound spears.

Now it was my turn.

"Dark Claw!" I shouted, summoning a shapeless mass of magic that hovered like a swarm of black winged insects around me.

It swiftly charged at the red orb—*Zoom!*—but the gray one made a beeline for the incoming danger yet again, clearly intending to defend Red by taking the hit instead!

Vrum! As Gray took the hit, Red spewed black mist right at us!

"What?!"

We quickly leaped away and took shelter behind a nearby

boulder. I then heard what sounded like water spraying against the ground. When we emerged from cover, we could see countless small, shallow holes eaten out of the other side of the rock.

Was that... the doing of a Dark Claw spell?! Of course! It looked like the orbs' strategy was for Gray to absorb our attacks and then, somehow, for Red to fire them back at us amplified.

“Everyone! Aim for the red one!” I called.

“Right!” Gourry responded, readying the Sword of Light as he charged.

Gray floated up in front of Red to block his strike. As it did, Red fired a few streaks of light at Gourry. He easily sliced through them, slipped by Gray, and kept charging for Red. Red quickly took its distance, almost bouncing its way up before stopping abruptly in midair, too high for the sword to reach.

Or so it thought! Gourry fired the Sword of Light’s blade at it, but... the red orb suddenly paled gray while the gray orb turned red!

They switched places?! The now-gray orb was speared on the blade of light, while the now-red orb was returning multiple shots at Gourry from behind.

This wasn’t good! He wouldn’t be able to dodge them! He whipped around in time to see the blades of light speeding toward him, and just then...

“Gaav Flare!”

A streak of fire raced through the air, engulfing the light racing at Gourry! *Nice one, Amelia!* She’d used a spell she’d prepared as an attack to intercept the barrage instead.

“Sorry! And thanks!” hailed Gourry as he retreated a safe distance.

Still, that was a pretty clever trick for a silly pair of balls. They could change color and swap properties at the same time.

Wait, was it possible... that they looked like two entities,

but were they actually a single being? They were way too in sync to be distinct individuals. Maybe its real body was on the astral plane, and these were just facets it was projecting into our world for attack and defense. But whatever the explanation, it didn't change the fact that we had to beat 'em.

The new Gray and Red regrouped, ignored Gourry, and charged straight at the rest of us. (I say "us," but of course, I was still their real target!)

"I think we'll just have to hit both at once!" Amelia said, sizing them up.

"Very well. You take one; I'll get the other," Zel responded, leaving our side to flank the orbs.

They were slowly gaining speed as they surged toward us through the air... Then, at the same time, they both unleashed a lighting strike!

Whaaat?! Amelia and I quickly leaped away from where we stood. The two spheres gave chase, continuing to lash lightning!

Fortunately, I'd finished chanting my spell. The rest would be up to Zel, so... I cast a glance his way, and he gave me a firm nod. Great! It seemed he was ready to play too. I nodded back.

"Elemekia Lance!" we shouted in unison.

Two spears of light thus hurtled toward the orbs. And just before they pierced their respective balls—*Snap!*—something invisible deflected them!

Geh! These things can't just counter the spells, they can block them too?!

The two spheres continued to accelerate, closing in on me fast! Were they just gonna crush me between them?!

Panicked, I started another chant... but I wouldn't finish it in time! Just as the red sphere got right up in my face...

"Vis Farank!" Amelia shouted.

Slam! There was a dull sound, and Red immediately disappeared from my sight.

Amelia had pooled magical power in her hands and sucker punched the orb. It rightfully hadn't been expecting anyone to straight-up punch it, so it ate the blow dead-on. The world's a big place, but I think the only people who could beat a demon to death with their bare hands were Amelia and her father.

Well, okay, maybe my big sister could pull it off...

Red went flying from the hit, and Amelia gave chase, slamming her fists into it a second time! I heard something—*Kreeeeeeee!*—probably a scream. Both spheres put out a sound like vibrating metal.

This had to mean they were the same entity after all.

As Amelia kept pounding on the red one, the other charged at her and... *Vwing!* Zelgadis closed in and sliced Gray in half with his magically-infused broadsword! And then... *Ba-bwoom!* Both Red and Gray exploded!

“Ugh...” I sat up with a soft moan.

My body ached all over. I wasn't too banged up, but I must have blacked out there for a second. My head was still fuzzy. It was hard to hear, too; the explosion had probably blown out my eardrums.

That's right. The balls exploded suddenly, and...

“Amelia! Zel!”

I quickly looked around and found the two of them collapsed, after being slammed against a rock face that had stopped their flight. It seemed I'd escaped the worst of the blast because I was farther away, but Zel and Amelia had taken it nearly point-blank.

Zel was trying to sit up with a groan regardless, but Amelia was lying completely still.

No way...

“Amelia?!“

I ran over to her in a panic. I took her arm and felt for a pulse... Good. She was still breathing.

But she was in rough shape... Casting Recovery was my

only option. Too bad it depleted the target's stamina in order to heal them. Unfortunately, given the severity of Amelia's injuries, it was hard to say whether I could even close her wounds before I sapped her strength entirely. Either way, it was clear she wouldn't last long in her current condition.

If only I could use Resurrection, which converted surrounding life force into healing power... But there was no point now in lamenting what I didn't have. I crouched down next to Amelia and began chanting Recovery.

"I don't think you'll make it in time like that," said a male voice. Kneeling down next to me now was...

"Milgazia, sir?"

Still in human form, he held a hand over Amelia's body.

Hru... u... u... Sounds a human voice could never produce drifted by on the wind. He seemed to be reciting a chant.

At last, his palm began to emit a faint blue light. It was a rather sickly color, but it was probably a healing spell. I watched as Amelia's wounds began to close before my very eyes. Whatever spell he was using, it might've been even more potent than Resurrection.



"You're saving her?" I asked quietly.

"Why should I abandon someone who is within my power to save? She is no enemy of mine," he replied, his eyes still focused down on Amelia.

"...Thank you..." I said earnestly, then turned my gaze back to Zel.

He may have hated his chimeric body, but his stony skin must have severely mitigated the damage he'd taken. He was already up and casting Recovery on himself. When he realized I was looking at him, he gave me a small nod. Seemed he could handle himself just fine.

Gourry, meanwhile, had been far enough away from the explosion that he was completely unscathed. "How's Amelia doing?" he asked, concerned, as he arrived at my side.

"Sir Milgazia is treating her. I think she'll be okay."

"That's great," he said with a sigh of relief.

But damn... this was my first time fighting demons that exploded when you beat them. Maybe that was Raltark's aim from the start. The orbs were probably going to self-destruct on me eventually one way or another. Raltark's only miscalculation was that their blast didn't pack quite the deadly punch he'd hoped for.

Still, that didn't change the fact that Zel and Amelia had taken a big hit because of me. That meant... it was time to return the favor!

"Gourry! Hand me the Sword of Light!"

"Got it!" he replied, tossing the sword—blade retracted—my way.

I caught it in my right hand and set my sights on Raltark, who was still deeply engaged in his battle with Xellos. I had a feeling I might be about to play into the hands of Xellos and his gang... but Raltark, Priest of the Dragon, *had* to go.

Anyway, let's do this! Dragon Slave Blade time!

Thou who art darker than twilight

Thou who art redder than lifeblood

I swear in thy exalted name

Obscured, deep in the flow of time...

While I was chanting my spell, Raltark—who was to Xellos's right from where I stood—realized what I was doing. That is, chanting an attack spell that called on the power of Ruby-Eye Dark Lord Shabranigdu. But as long as that power had to be channeled through the meager capacity of a human... well, it wouldn't do *nothing* against Raltark, but it certainly wouldn't be enough to kill him.

However...

I had a trick up my sleeve I'd tried once before. See, when I cast a Dragon Slave through the Sword of Light and focused its red light into a blade, it gave me something with significant destructive power.

Raltark had no way of knowing this, but he wasn't about to let me just go about whatever I was up to. That message came in the form of a small ball of magic he fired my way.

Not good! I could have just batted it away, but I was worried its tiny size might belie some major blasting power. Smacking it down like a rock or something could mean an explosion practically to the face. And yet, if I just dodged, it would hit the others behind me...

Ugh! Let's give this a test, then!

Just as I made up my mind to knock it out of the air... the approaching ball of magic was swallowed up by the air around it and disappeared. Probably Xellos's protective handiwork again. Raltark looked stunned to see his attack nullified so easily.

And in that moment, I finished my spell: "Dragon Slave!"

Responding to my words of power, the Sword of Light in my right hand produced a crimson blade! And with it at the ready, I raced across the ground toward Raltark! While looking somewhat shaken, he expanded his spiritual presence.

Bwoosh! The ensuing wave of pressure stopped me in my tracks. I could lean into it if I wanted, but while I called it "spiritual presence," it was more akin to miasma. Continued

exposure would chip away at my stamina and make it hard to keep going.

So instead, while fighting against the pressure, I gripped my sword in both hands and...

“Go!” I shouted, firing the ruby blade at Raltark!

Hit him, darn it!

Raltark clicked his tongue, and just as he tried to dodge—*Whoom!*—a single black drill appeared out of empty space, impaling his stomach! *Xellos!*

“Graaaaaaaaagh!” Raltark bellowed in an echoing scream.

Then... *Crash!* The crimson light I’d shot pierced the screaming Priest of the Dragon straight through the chest. As Raltark reeled back, another black drill appeared out of nowhere and pulverized his head! And that was the end of Dragon Priest Raltark.

Bwush! His body burst apart like a piece of fruit beneath a sledgehammer. All that remained was an indigo sludge dripping from where he’d once been, but that too was soon gone—either carried off by the wind or sunk into the ground.

The only ones standing now were Beast Priest Xellos, smiling like always... and the thoroughly dumbfounded General Rashart.

“S-Sir Raltark...!” Rashart gasped in a trembling voice as he slowly turned his gaze to Xellos.

“Now then,” Xellos said, and...

“Aaaaah!” Rashart disappeared with a pathetic scream.

...

A long silence followed.

“Ah... he got away so easily,” Xellos whispered at last, scratching at the tip of his nose.

“Gaaah! He didn’t get away! You *let him go!* Why?!” I found myself yelling, frustrated by Xellos’s perpetually unflappable nature.

“Well, it just happened so suddenly. But Miss Lina, I must greatly thank you for your aid. Goodness, the way you

distracted Master Raltark... I daresay I was genuinely in trouble for a moment there. Are the others quite all right?"

Ack, of course! I didn't have time to be arguing with Xellos! I turned right around and headed back to where Zelgadis was resting on the ground.

I returned the Sword of Light to its rightful owner and said, "Thanks, Gourry. How are you holding up, Zel?"

"It's not so bad. For me, at least..." he said firmly, though he looked pretty beat. "How's Amelia?"

"Sir Milgazia is treating her. I'll go have a look," I said, heading that way next.

"The treatment is finished," the golden dragon elder said to me calmly. "She should be fine now."

Amelia was still lying there unconscious, but her wounds had closed and she was breathing normally. Whew... That was a load off my mind.

"Thank you, sir," I said, bowing to Milgazia.

"No need to thank me," he said bluntly, averting his eyes.

Was he getting bashful on me? I felt an urge to tease him, but...

"The door seems to have disappeared," he muttered then, still looking away.

"What door?" I asked, following his gaze.

There was now a large hole in the cliff that towered over the road leading up to the peak. Wait...

"To the Claire Bible?!"

"Indeed."

I walked up to the gaping hole in the rock face, where the path to the Claire Bible had been hidden, and reached out experimentally. My hand would have passed through the wall before, but now it met with the hard surface of the rock. Probably thanks to the explosion Raltark had set off from inside...

"Does this mean... the Claire Bible is gone too?"

"This is not the only 'door' to the disruption," Milgazia whispered to me. "The meager power he released would not

have been enough to destroy its nexus, the Claire Bible itself. Although I can't be certain that the disappearance of this door had no influence on it whatsoever."

Welp, so much for hearing more about the Sword of Light and learning how to restore Zel's humanity... I'd have to find another door somewhere else.

Hey, that's right...

When I stopped to think about it, Xellos had known there was a door to the Claire Bible here. That meant he probably had the scoop on others too.

I turned back to him and asked, "Hey, Xellos, you know where else I might find a path to the Claire Bible?"

He looked back at me, troubled, hemming, "Well... I do know of quite a few... but they're not easy to get to, and I can't actually tell you where they are."

Figures.

"Why not?!" I decided to argue, even though I could imagine the reason just fine on my own.

"Well... my job was merely to deliver you to the Claire Bible the first time. If I went leading you to another door just because this one is now gone, I do believe I'd be in for a stern talking-to."

"Ever the grudging errand boy, huh?"

"Well, we insignificant lower demons must abide the wills of our greater. The only reason Raltark and Rashart were able to turn against us was because they were ordered to do so by their progenitor, Chaos Dragon Gaav."

"But if demons are so beholden to orders from above, why doesn't Gaav follow the orders of *his* progenitor, Ruby-Eye?"

"Now... that's a rather complicated story." Xellos began to descend the mountain road toward us as he spoke, nonchalantly. "It started with the Incarnation War a thousand years ago. Ruby-Eye and Chaos Dragon fought Aqualord directly, and when Aqualord was destroyed, Chaos Dragon more or less died striking the killing blow. Now, to say that one of our kind 'dies' doesn't mean total

annihilation. It only means that our power is temporarily sealed away—that we lose our ability to influence the world until it recoups. Under normal circumstances, we revive naturally in time.”

“You guys come back to life?”

“Well, it depends on the individual demon’s power and the nature of the defeat. Those who are annihilated... that is, their will, memory, and soul are fundamentally obliterated... might see their power carried on in a new vessel, but they will never reconstitute in the same form again.

“Meanwhile, those that merely ‘die’ may lose their ability to manifest in this world, but they may yet regain their power somehow or other as time passes, allowing them to return once more.” Xellos came to a stop as he reached Zelgadis, who was now standing on his own two feet, albeit shakily. “Lower-level demons frequently end up manifested as lesser demons, brass demons, or other half-formed creatures barely worthy of the name before they manage to muster their true power again... But a being as powerful as Chaos Dragon would have achieved a perfect revival in time, under normal circumstances.

“However... Aqualord placed a curious seal on Chaos Dragon. Just before he was destroyed, he used a piece of his own soul, most likely using their similar draconic natures as a catalyst, to force the dying Chaos Dragon to reincarnate into a human body. But the spell apparently wasn’t perfect—and so, after countless reincarnations, Chaos Dragon eventually recovered his memories and abilities. All well and good, of course, except...”

Speaking as a human, I daresay that wasn’t “well and good” at all.

“Through the chain of reincarnations, that shard of Aqualord’s soul achieved its intended purpose as an intermediary and merged part of the revived Chaos Dragon’s spirit with his human host’s. Obviously, his demonic traits are fundamentally dominant, but his human traits interacted

with them in an unexpected way that served to isolate him from Ruby-Eye's control. He then actively began to oppose Ruby-Eye, and even dragged the subordinates he once created into his cause! Really, young people these days... What is one to do?"

"Young'?"

"Ah... merely a figure of speech. I'm sure Chaos Dragon simply thought that a traitor like him could not possibly survive if demonkind remained united under Lord Ruby-Eye. The only part of Ruby-Eye currently active is the Dark Lord of the North in the Kataart Mountains, and should anything happen to him... the demons, their lord lost, would simply begin to act in their own individual interests. That would increase Chaos Dragon's own chances for survival. I expect that's why he's trying to rally the humans, dragons, and elves in an attack on the Kataart Mountains. He wishes to use the chaos to slay Ruby-Eye, still half-sealed by Aqualord and unable to bring his full powers to bear..."

"And yet you crushed those plans," said a voice from behind us.

I hurriedly turned to see the knight in dragon armor standing there, naked blade in hand.

What, this guy again?

"Ohh... You've returned, Master Rashart," Xellos said breezily.

"I can't beat you myself with Sir Raltark gone... But I can at least finish off that girl," Dragon General Rashart hissed, his hateful eyes locked on the Beast Priest.

"I see. I sympathize, to be sure, but I'm afraid—"

"Xellos!" Gourry shouted, interrupting him. As he did, I felt a new presence upon us.

"Ngh?!" Xellos whipped around, a rare note of panic in his voice.

Just then, a red flash appeared in thin air!

Vrm! Unable to dodge the strike fully, Xellos was parted from his arm at the shoulder!

What the—?! While I was still processing what had just happened, another swipe from the side cut through his stomach!

With a gasp, Xellos quickly drew back. It didn't seem to be a fatal blow, but it brought him limply to one knee. Before his severed arm could hit the ground, it turned to black mist and disappeared.

"Xellos!" I ran over to him without thinking.

That strike had seemed to come from nowhere, just like those black drills Xellos used...

"Attacks from the astral side *were* your thing, weren't they, Priest?" said a deep voice.

I turned to see an unfamiliar man standing there, as if to block my escape from Rashart. He looked about twenty years old. He was broad-chested, muscular, and clad in a coat the color of ivory. He carried a single-edged crimson longsword in his right hand, the spine of which was resting against his shoulder. He had a sort of unkempt handsomeness about him, but his face was plastered with a wide grin that bordered on wicked. His long red hair was blowing in the wind.

"It's been quite some time..." Xellos muttered from the ground, "Chaos Dragon Gaav..."

Of course... Rashart had disappeared and then reappeared because he was calling this guy to the scene.

"It *has* been a while, eh? Since the Incarnation War, yeah?"

He sauntered up to the crumpled Xellos, walking right past me and Gourry on our guard, and continued to talk like he was catching up with an old friend. As a demon, Xellos didn't shed a single drop of blood; there was just a pristine white cross-section where his arm had come off. Bloodless though the scene was, however, it was plainly obvious that our usually-cheerful friend was in a bad way.

"You've changed a great deal in the thousand years since I saw you last, Chaos Dragon..."

“Oh yeah? Was I a little more even-tempered in those days?”

“Quite the opposite... I think you were much quicker to anger back then.”

“Maybe so,” Gaav responded with a smile. “But you’re still the same Priest Xellos I used to know, aren’t you? Taking two hits from me and still kicking... I admit, that would’ve easily obliterated Rashart or Raltark.”

Rashart, who was standing farther down the road, naturally looked unhappy about that comment, but chose to keep his mouth shut.

“Nevertheless, this should keep you down and out for a while. Though you *will* recover...”

“I am aware... Injured this badly, I’m not sure I could beat even Rashart...”

“Even’?!?”

“Still... I’m sorry to say it, but you’ve been a real thorn in my side,” Gaav continued, ignoring Rashart’s objection. “All those little schemes, then killing Raltark... I thought we were doing pretty well at the secrecy thing, sneaking around so we wouldn’t harm any humans or draw your attention. Losing Gyria City really hurt, you know. We were working especially hard there.”

“Oh, please!” I found myself shouting and pointing at Rashart. “He tore up the whole place just to try to kill me!”

Hearing this, Chaos Dragon scowled and looked over at me. “What are you talking about?”

“Ah, I see... You haven’t caught on,” Rashart said. “It was Xellos who razed Gyria.”

What...? Instantly dumbstruck, I turned my eyes on Xellos. He said not a word... just remained where he was on the ground with that same implacable smile on his face.

“B... But...”

“I’ll be clearer, girl,” Rashart said to me. “My job was to bring the Kingdom of Dils to heel, as well as win over the dragons and elves. Finishing you off was Sir Raltark’s duty.

It's true that I thought to take you out myself once I learned you were in the city... but I had no intention of doing so immediately.

"I wasn't lying at the palace. I really did want you to give magic lessons to my soldiers, empowering them to deal damage to low-level demons. My thought was to kill you once you'd done that. But before I could even put my designs into motion, Xellos showed up, changed his voice and appearance, and tore the palace and city to shreds under the pretext of attacking you. Raising an army was impossible after that.

"Think about it, girl. Of course I knew you were a part of Hellmaster's plot... but what kind of fool would I have to be to willingly sabotage my *own* plan—and a very important one at that—just to try to foil a complete unknown?"

Ahh...

"Xellos... you..." I whispered hoarsely, staring at him.

The Priest of the Beast remained silent.

So that was it... He'd simultaneously crushed Chaos Dragon's army and framed Rashart for it, inflaming my rage against Gaav's faction and making me all the easier to manipulate. I thought I was walking into this with eyes wide open, yet he'd still managed to go one better on me...

But if that was all part of his plan, then—

"Well, now you know the story," Gaav said in the same friendly tone. And then...

Crack! He delivered a swift kick to Xellos's chin.

"...I take back what I said," Xellos said, picking himself up. "Your temper... is precisely as bad as it ever was..."

"Is it? Well, no matter." Chaos Dragon pointed the tip of his shouldered sword at Xellos. "Time to come clean. What the hell is Fibrizo planning?"

"I'm afraid Lord Hellmaster hasn't told me anything of his plan," he said, repeating the same answer he'd given to Amelia.

But Gaav replied calmly, "I see. Let's try asking this way,

then. Has anyone *besides* Hellmaster—for instance, Greater Beast—told you the plan?”

“Huh?!” A small cry slipped my lips.

Dude was right... Xellos had never said he didn’t *know* the plan.

“How astute of you,” Xellos said with a weak smile. “You are correct... Greater Beast Zellas Metallium told me the details of the plan. Our objective is...”

“Is what?” Gaav parroted.

“A secret,” Xellos answered with a grin.

And with that... he disappeared without a trace.

“He’s escaped?!” Rashart cried out in shock.

“Pursue him, Rashart,” Gaav said, remaining calm. “I’ll follow soon after. Although, in his current condition, you can likely beat him yourself.”

“Sir!” Rashart responded, then disappeared too.

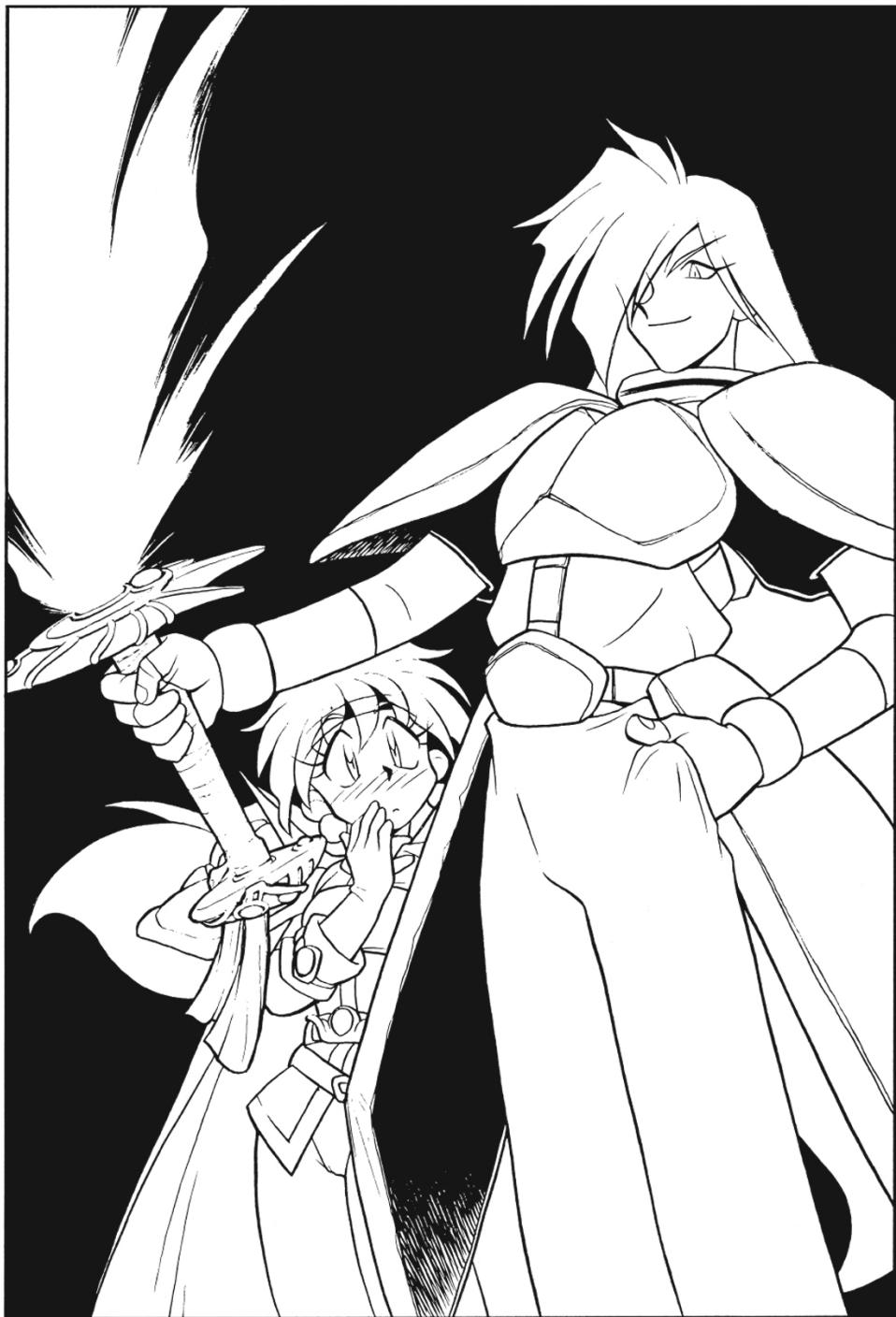
“Now, let’s see...” Gaav whispered, now slowly turning toward me.

I took a big step backward. There was no doubt in my mind what his next move was.

He’s going to kill me.

“I still don’t know what Hellmaster’s up to... But I need you dead, whatever it is,” he said, spitting out the exact line I’d been expecting. “Partly to crush Hellmaster’s plan, but also as payback for all you’ve put us through.”

“I won’t let you do that,” Gourry responded. He readied the Sword of Light in his right hand, slowly moving forward to step between us.



"Ohh... you have Gorun Nova! Very cool," Gaav said, like a child who'd just seen an interesting toy.

Gorun Nova... Wasn't that what the Claire Bible had called the Sword of Light?

"But let me warn you: there's no way a human can beat me with that. No point in risking your life on a losing battle, is there?"

"I'm her guardian," Gourry said, even smiling. "Self-declared, of course. But even so... a self-declared guardian is still a guardian. I can't just stand back and watch you kill her."

"Same here." This came from Zelgadis, who spoke up in a hoarse voice. He must not have been completely healed yet, because his footsteps were unsteady. Still, his eyes were locked on Gaav. "I'm no guardian—just her companion. But I still won't let you do this. Even though... in my current state, the best I can manage is probably a few attack spells..."

"Regardless, we'll give it everything we've got!" came a cheerful voice from my other side.

"Amelia!"

All right! I don't know when she'd woken up, but just like always, she had her chin up proudly, and she was pointing boldly at Gaav!

"I don't know how tough you are, villain, but as long as we do our best, good will always triumph!"

Ohh! She was really back in business!

"Hey, Amelia! Are you okay?"

"Hah! A heart that loves justice can survive a little explosion or two!"

I guess she doesn't remember being on death's door back there...

"By the way, Lina, just who is this man?!"

Blam! Our heads all exploded at that. Even Chaos Dragon's expression was strained as he turned his eyes in Amelia's direction.

"H-Hey, Amelia! Don't spew out Gourry-class stupidity at

a time like this! When did you even wake up?!"

"Around the time he said, 'I still don't know what Hellmaster's up to, but I need you dead.' From that I intuited he was a villain, which triggered my justice rage!"

"Arrrgh! Okay, fine! This is Chaos Dragon Gaav! He just took out Xellos, who ran the hell away!"

"Chaos... Dragon?" Amelia frowned slightly. "Hah... You're not how I imagined you at all! I figured you'd be cooler looking!"

"I'm no fan of all that bluster," Gaav said in a calm tone that turned dry as he continued. "I *could* take a more monstrous form... but I like this one. Transforming into a monster wouldn't make me any stronger, and you wouldn't do me the decency of being intimidated... so it's all a waste of effort."

But Amelia, true to form, kept her finger on him and declared, "Regardless, you dragged the courts of Saillune and Dils into chaos and tried to kill Lina! You're unquestionably evil!"

"Don't make me laugh," Gaav replied with a snort. "Good and evil have nothing to do with this. I'm just doing what I have to to survive."

"So you harm innocent people and sow chaos across the land merely to serve your own ends?! What is that if not evil?!"

"All right, then let me ask you this... To save *her* own life, Lina over there is willingly serving Hellmaster despite knowing it will bring chaos into the world. Doesn't that make her evil too? And as her companion, aren't you evil by association?" Gaav asked mockingly.

"Guh?!" This took Amelia's breath away.

"What's wrong with fighting to survive? Or should I be like those idiots in the Kataart Mountains whose only purpose in life is to destroy everything, including themselves? Hmm?"

"Destroy everything?!" Amelia echoed.

"Yeah. Demons want to destroy the world, then destroy

themselves, and return everything to chaos. It's what they were originally created for."

Of course... That's right.

"A thousand years ago, I thought the same way they did. But after dying and being reborn inside a human body over and over again, I started to change my mind. I can't stay with the Kataart bastards anymore. True, I could just keep running from them, but... if something happens to revive the other Ruby-Eye fragments, I'll be destroyed along with the rest of the world sooner or later.

"That leaves me only one option: attack and destroy the Ruby-Eye fragments one by one myself, starting with the Dark Lord of the North in Kataart." There, Gaav turned to face me again. "Destroy Ruby-Eye to survive, crush the plans of Hellmaster to survive, kill you to survive... That's what it all comes down to. I'm fighting to survive—I'm like you, in a way.

"Don't worry. I won't do anything stupid like ask for you to *let* me kill you... Resist all you like and try your best to stay alive. Your allies are free to help," he said, slowly readying the sword in his right hand.

"Then prepare yourself!" Amelia shouted and began chanting a spell.

It was... a Ra Tilt, the ultimate shamanistic spell usable by humans! It had power enough to take out most demons in one hit, but this was Chaos Dragon... How much effect would it really have against him?

Eventually, she finished her chant, and... *Fwee!* A sound like a whistle came from Gaav's mouth.

"Ra Tilt!"

Amelia unleashed a blue pillar that temporarily consumed Gaav's body, and then... *Kringgg!* With a piercing sound, the blue pillar shattered!

"What?!" Amelia gasped, her jaw dropping in shock.

Yep, figured as much... Except this was no time to act smug.

“A straight-on hit from a spell like that is no worse than getting nipped by a kitten... But it would still hurt, so I decided to block it.”

His casual description rendered Amelia speechless.

“Gorun Nova, in human hands, wouldn’t do much damage either. About the only one of your kind who’d stand a chance would be that Knight of Ceifeed I’ve heard so much about.”

Oh?

“She’s busy waiting tables, actually...” I said.

But Gaav ignored me, perhaps assuming I was talking nonsense. *Well, fine, whatever.* At any rate, I decided...

“Gourry! Let’s go!”

“Right!”

Realizing what I was trying to do, Gourry nodded and readied the Sword of Light. As for me, I started working on a chant.

“Dragon Slave?” Gaav scowled a little in mockery. “That won’t work either, just so you know.”

I was sure it wouldn’t... *if* I hit him with it directly, that is.

Chaos Dragon made that whistling sound again, which I assumed was a defensive spell.

“Dragon Slave!”

Fwsh! As I called forth my spell, the blade in Gourry’s hand took on a red gleam!

“Oh?!”

Half surprised and half amused, Gaav took a defensive stance for the first time. The fact that he wasn’t aware of our little trick suggested that Rashart hadn’t shared the details of Raltark’s demise.

“You can do that, eh? Interesting! I was thinking of killing you offhandedly with an attack from the astral plane... but this makes things a lot more fun!” he remarked in a voice that sounded delighted rather than scared. He then turned to face Gourry. “Well... let’s go.”

There, he sprang into a dash. This guy was *fast*!

“Whew!” Gourry managed to block an upward slash

followed by a thrust.

Clink! Clash! Each time the ruby Sword of Light blocked a strike from Gaav's own crimson blade, it released shockwaves and sparks of red plasma. It was a sign my spell on the sword was losing power. Meanwhile, there wasn't a single nick on Chaos Dragon's blade. Gaav and Gourry seemed about even skill-wise, but Gourry was at a clear disadvantage—the Sword of Light would eventually go out.

That meant I just had to finish things before then. I was the only one who stood any chance of dealing real damage to Chaos Dragon. But now that I knew its true form, I felt even more hesitant to use *that...*

Still, I couldn't just let Gourry die.

Okay, okay, just do it! There's no chance of it going out of control in this form!

As with a Fireball, I held my palms in front of my chest, a little ways apart. Next, I recited the amplification chant. Responding to the chaos words from my lips, the four Demon Blood talismans on my wrists, belt, and necklace let out pale light in different colors. Then I raised my right hand high to the sky and began the spell...

Fragment of the Lord of Nightmares

*Blade forged of the freezing black void,
Be released from thy worldly seal
Become mine, become part of me
Let us mete destruction as one
Smash even the souls of the gods...*

“What?!” Chaos Dragon bellowed in surprise when he heard my incantation. Gourry sliced at him without missing a beat, but all his blade did was put a light scratch on Gaav's chest.

I'd made some adjustments to the chant based on the knowledge I'd gained from the Claire Bible and my own speculation. Yup. This was the perfected form of...

“Ragna Blade!”

Vrummmmm!

The very air itself seemed to tremble as a blade of pure void manifested in my right hand!

“Ngh!” I couldn’t help but let out a groan. The power was... incredible! Even more than before! I couldn’t believe how intense it was!

Of course, that made the burden on me all the greater. It was taking all of my stamina and spiritual power just to keep the blade under control. I wouldn’t last long like this!

“Hyah!”

I ran with all my might and slashed at Gaav, who was still shaken by the sight! He readied his red blade to parry me. The moment I swung my black sword, everything went hazy for a second.

Is the depletion that insane?! Just as I thought that, the sword began to go wild. As my strength left me, I brought the black blade down...

And felt nothing.

The black blade simply fell, soundless and sensationless, cutting through Chaos Dragon Gaav’s crimson sword—right along with his arm.

“Graaah!” he cried in agony.

But I was at my limit. The black blade returned to the void, and I fell to my knees in disappointment.

Hahh, hahh, hahh... My breath came heavy and ragged. I was drenched in sweat from head to toe. The upkeep on the spell had been far more taxing than I’d imagined. I had almost no stamina or spiritual power left.

“Gourry!” I called hoarsely, mustering the last bit of my strength.

“Right!”

Heeding my call, he sliced at Gaav—and Gaav let out a roar!

“Raaah!”

His spirit flared up, channeling into a shockwave that blasted both me and Gourry backward!

“Erk!” I went rolling limply across the ground. I tried to

straighten up, but my body felt weak.

I looked up to find Gaav walking slowly toward me... I could see what remained of his severed right arm being eaten away by something black, little by little.

“I will kill you!” Chaos Dragon howled, his red hair rippling.

And then, the next instant...

A death rattle echoed across Dragons’ Peak—coming from Chaos Dragon Gaav!

(To be continued!)

Afterword

Scene: The Author and L

Au: The *Slayers* TV anime started airing today, and it's been an eventful day for other reasons. I hope everyone's doing well.

L: This has been *Slayers: Gaav's Challenge!* But just when it seemed like things were coming to an end, this volume gives us a "to be continued!"

Au: Yeah. Actually, the cliffhanger was a little worse originally.

L: Worse? How so?

Au: It was going to end with a scream and *then* the "to be continued!" In my initial draft, you didn't get to know who was doing the screaming.

L: Wow, really?

Au: Yes. But since the next novel wouldn't be out for six months, I decided the readers might get pissed. So I changed it.

L: Jeez... These reprints are coming out so fast that I never thought about that. Six months would have been torture.

Au: Yep. Being on the reader side of that "to be continued" can be rough. I used to follow this one detective manga. There would be a murder and the detective would figure out the culprit, but then you'd get "to be continued" just before he named them. My curiosity always drove me to buy the next installment when it came out months later... but when I'd read "It was you, X!" in the first line, I could never remember the actual case or what was going on.

L: Seriously?

Au: I mean, it was months later and I was always reading other stuff in the meantime. So the detective would reveal

his conclusion and the case would be solved, and then in the same volume, there'd be another murder. The detective would say, "I know... who the real culprit is!" Then you'd get hit with the "to be continued" again. And as the reader, I'd be like, "Wait, who's the killer?! I'm dying to know!" And so on and so on in an endless cycle.

L: Are you... stupid or something?

Au: Rgh... I hate that I can't deny it!

L: And I'm sure the person who wrote the manga would be disappointed! If it was such a problem, why didn't you just reread the last installment before the next one came out?

Au: Heh, don't be naive! You think I could find a comic I bought a few months ago inside a room so messy that it looks haunted?!

L: Don't brag about that! Clean up your room!

Au: Well, I do... When I get around to it, I throw all my old junk in a garbage bag, then pile up the books I've already read next to the bookshelf.

L: When you "get around to it"? You put things *next* to the bookshelf?

Au: And when I'm done, I whisper, "Yes, I've done it!" with a triumphant smile, and immediately turn on the TV...

L: That's terrible! All you do is throw away some garbage and move stuff from point A to point B!

Au: Huh? But it gets everything in order...

L: Does not! All you're doing is satisfying your desire to *feel* like you cleaned! And don't just do it when you "get around to it"! Do it regularly! And don't be satisfied piling up books *next* to a shelf! Keep working until the floor is clean!

Au: Hmph... But everyone has their limits.

L: Even children can clean their own rooms!

Au: Aww, but...

L: Aha... hahaha... Okay, fine. I'm going to share the secret of how even someone like you can clean up their place.

Au: Really?! What is it?!

L: First, bring me some gasoline and a lighter. And have a moving crew ready.

Au: Er, sorry... I think I'll pass. I've realized it's best to just keep things clean.

L: But given the state of things... I sure hope you don't have important work documents buried under all that mess.

Au: Oh, surely not... Surely. After all, since I know they'll get buried if they sit for too long, I always deal with work-related stuff as soon as possible!

L: Couldn't you just... clean your room?

Au: I see... Looking at it with fresh eyes, huh?

L: More like normal eyes? Well, it's no skin off my nose either way... You're lucky anyone even reads your stories at this point.

Au: Urgh... Is this even an afterword, or just a hate-on-the-author-fest? Welp, that's all for this time!

Afterword: Over.

Slayers 7
GAAV'S CHALLENGE







“Been a while, eh?”

**The man sauntered up to
the crumpled Xellos.**





Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!

[Meg/ED]

Welp, we're back to *Slayers NEXT* for volume 7, which covers about episodes 18-21. And they kinda kick off with the big bomb that closes this volume... That is, meeting the much-rumored Gaav!

[Liz/TL]

Gaav is important! It's a long way getting to him, too.

[Meg/ED]

Gaav is a *big* player in this game—and, holy cow, has said game gotten intense! There are a lot of moving pieces on the board at this point, some of which we won't even get to until next time.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah we're going to have to walk a fine line so we don't get into spoilers, which is tricky since my head is already in volume 8 and they kinda flow together a little! We see Raltark get owned, at least, and Xellos get kind of half-owned.

[Meg/ED]

This book and the next really do go hand in hand in a way we haven't seen before in the series. It's hard to think of them as distinct stories because of it. I'm glad you mentioned Raltark, though. He might be a fun place to kick off our discussion since he's notably missing from the anime. Rashart too.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, as was the case in the volume 6 adaptation they're replaced by another character who fills a similar role. And which character is that? Why, it's our old pal Seigram! Since *NEXT* starts with the "Sorcerers of Atlas" arc and doesn't cover Zuma at all, he had to go somewhere I guess. It's actually a pretty good conservation of characters, given the anime's priorities.

[Meg/ED]

Agreed. And Seigram's extra scary now that he's supercharged with Chaos Dragon's power. This allows him to fill in the Raltark/Rashart role pretty nicely since it enables him to go toe to toe with Xellos.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, I suppose it's a little less interesting from a "lore" perspective, since you're not getting the same drip of information about Priests and Generals and demon hierarchies. But it does what it needs to do, which is to give the heroes a known face to punch (and to loom threatening in the OP sequence).

On the subject of Seigram getting transplanted from the Zuma arc to here, though, I think this section of *NEXT* actually serves as an interesting contrast with the *Revolution* adaptation of volume 6. As we discussed last time, that one followed the plot of the novel to the letter, more or less, but ended up in a very different place at the very end. Whereas I feel like this arc in *NEXT* ends up at a similar place but takes a different route to get there at pretty much every turn.

[Meg/ED]

It's absolutely fascinating. There's so much good stuff to chew on here. Volume 7 is probably our most lore-rich installment since volume 1, and the anime definitely

truncates that by arranging elements of the story differently. But whereas we have a mounting tension in this book because of the looming threat that is Chaos Dragon Gaav, that danger is very upfront in the anime because he appears much sooner. And the man comes in swinging. I guess, simply put, we're trading intrigue for action. I thought that would result in a huge departure from the novels, but in the end, it's simply a more visual way to get to the same place.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, it's an understandable trade given the formats involved. In a visual medium, you want to get to the spectacle a little earlier, and you need to have at least one big spectacle per episode. *NEXT* also made "searching for the Claire Bible" kind of the framing device throughout its runtime, both in plot episodes and comic relief episodes. So instead of taking us through the mystery in Dils that introduces Rashart, they made an interesting choice to include a sequence with a "hard copy" of the Claire Bible (which is comically huge and located in a pocket dimension) and give us Gaav early. Incidentally this is also the first place we learn that Xellos is a demon, which in and of itself says a lot about how different our journey getting here is!

[Meg/ED]

The Sand Temple is quite interesting to me. I initially suspected the perfect manuscript located there would be a way to bypass our trip to Dragon's Peak, but nope! It's basically just an extra-dimensional excuse to introduce us to Gaav... and also to Grammie Aqua, an anime-original addition!

[Liz/TL]

Now she is a character I'd completely forgotten about before the rewatch, but I think she becomes extremely interesting when viewed through the lens of the novels. At first I

thought she was just there to humanize Lina a little by showing that she can be unflinchingly kind and respectful to her elders (which *is* nice to see). But she also adds something to the Claire Bible mythos that makes the Bible seem... more innately benevolent?

In this volume, I feel like the Bible comes off as this very neutral thing, just a kind of natural force that doesn't care how you use its power. But the anime gives it a kind of personification, and that personification is portrayed as a noble and protective force that *likes* our heroes. I'm extremely curious as to whether the revelation we get there is one of those things that's Kanzaka Canon that he just couldn't find a way to fit into the story here, or if it's something the anime added to make us feel a little more confident in Lina's choices.

[Meg/ED]

Hmm... I was thinking that Grammie Aqua was an attempt to inject some lore back into the anime, but you're right. She does have a humanizing presence, especially when she reappears for the scene at the *actual* Claire Bible in Dragons' Peak.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, which is another sequence that's very similar to the novels in a lot of ways, but also adds its own flavor. Again, partly since "search for the Claire Bible" has been the season's framing device up to this point, they've been dealing with a lot of red herrings throughout. This means Xellos doesn't openly lead them there, and Lina doesn't have quite the same eyes-open quality about the degree to which she's being manipulated. So when we finally get there, it's less the culmination of a steady buildup and more of an "ah, finally" feeling of release after a series of frustrations. That means you can have the same events happen here—the first meeting with Milgazia, the dragons

taking flight, the revelation of Xellos's role in the Incarnation War, then the trip into the rock face—but they're colored very differently.

[Meg/ED]

We could probably go on at length about the nuance in the differing details of the Claire Bible scenes (for example, how does it change things when Lina learns the truth about Gaav's reincarnation from the Claire Bible rather than Xellos?). I have to say that Milgazia is a character that really came alive for me in the show, though. I read him as stony in the novels, but there's something really wrenching about *seeing* the fear on his face when he talks about Xellos.

[Liz/TL]

I think the anime and the novel compliment each other well there. Like you say, I think having the visuals and voice acting helps to add more character to his stoicism in the novels, but having some of the extra novel content (like the scene where Lina wants to talk to him but feels too intimidated, which is present but abridged in the adaptation) as a backing makes the anime character feel a little richer.

And... if I may say so, this is not the last we'll be seeing of him in the novels! So some of his later characterization may also influence my opinion. (I confess, as a teen, I saw Milgazia as kind of a non-entity. That was wrong and I was wrong. He's awesome.)

[Meg/ED]

You're so right. I hadn't even realized the extent to which I was regarding the novels as context for the characters, rather than seeing them as separate entities. Let me put on my thinking cap for a sec...

Another defining moment of Milgazia's character for me is the moment he tells Lina that it's okay to be concerned

about her own life, even amidst some grand plot. That the struggle for survival is a natural thing. So in the novels, I saw Milgazia, Lina, and Gaav as an odd sort of trifecta, because they're the three characters in this volume who are doing the struggling to survive.

But that doesn't really carry with anime Gaav, who's cast as a much grander villain. Sans all the supplementary context of the books, that is.

[Liz/TL]

I see what you mean. I think you technically get that scene in the anime, where Gaav talks about how he's also doing this to survive and that maybe they're the same because of it. But maybe since you don't have the same long buildup of Lina reflecting on Hellmaster's plan and the demons' manipulations of her, it comes off a little more like fight trash talk than a thematic focal point?

[Meg/ED]

Yeah, it's kind of perfunctory.

[Liz/TL]

One thing that strikes me as you mention that though is how maybe *TRY* tried to add a little bit of that sympathy for Gaav back in, retroactively, with the Valgaav character.

[Meg/ED]

That's true! And on the subject of sympathy, there's someone else I'd very much like to talk about, but I'm a bit scared of an alabaster hand popping out of my chest... Maybe it'll be safer next volume?

[Liz/TL]

Almost assuredly! Yeah, our chat this month is a little harder than usual, partly because of how this arc runs into the next one, but also because of how, well, like I said before... Some

of the adaptational differences are extremely noticeable, whereas others are much more subtle outcomes of having a very different buildup. I think that's a sign of a good adaptation, though, that we're talking less about whether or not things are working, and more about how the two formats contrast or compliment each other thematically. *NEXT* was always my favorite as a young'un and I feel like this illustrates why it worked so well for me, even if I didn't have the knowledge of what was going on in the novels to tell me *why* it was working.

[Meg/ED]

I was always partial to the first season myself, but I admit I'm gaining a profound new appreciation for *NEXT* as we go along. We'll definitely be closing it out next time with our biggest bang yet... Cue cliffhanger!

[Liz/TL]

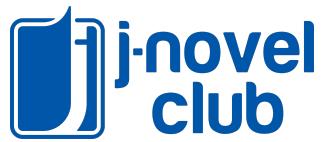
It's exciting! The end of an arc!

[Meg/ED]

I honestly can't believe how fast we've gotten here!

[Liz/TL]

And after this... a whole new world! But we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.



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